

PD 7 LONG VOWELS

The most discomfoting aspect of teaching phonics is the old complaint: English is too **irregular**.

Why don't the words "low" and "how" rhyme? Or "paid" and "said"? And even when some words *do* rhyme, how can two words with the same spelling be pronounced differently like "bow" (a knot) and "bow" (bend low).

Is it a jungle out there? Or is there enough consistency to allow teaching to be effective?

The good news:

"[These examples] might cause one to reconsider the teaching of reading ... because of the seemingly irregular and unpredictable nature of the English language. However, 84% of English words conform to "regular" spelling patterns. Of the remaining 16%, only 3% are highly unpredictable, such as colonel and Ouija (Bryson, 1990)."¹

This is reassuring, because with long vowels we progress beyond the safe and easy territory of short vowels – with their typically short, one syllable words (cat, pet, pin, pot, tub) – and venture into the more complex land of multiple vowels – ea (beat), ee (meet), oa (boat), a – e (ape), i – e (kite), and so on.

It is *not* wise to start with long vowels. They need a lot of explaining. They are **not** for absolute beginners.

Why are long vowels complex?

This question takes us back to the long and rich history of English.

Take a simple sound like the long vowel "a" - as in **cake**.

The convention here is that a following silent e – the "magic e" (or marker e) – causes a short vowel like the "a" in fat to become a long vowel (like the "a" in fate).

Why?



¹ Blevins, W. (2005), *Phonics from A to Z*, Scholastic

Because originally, in Middle English (700 years ago) the silent e was pronounced in full², not suppressed as it is these days. In Chaucer (c1400), we read one character saying:

“I wol both drinke, and eten of a cake.” [I will both drink and eat a cake.]³

The word **cake** was pronounced to rhyme with baker or maker (the e sounded out).

Within a couple of centuries (by the time of Shakespeare), the final e had disappeared as a *separate voiced sound*. But the spelling remained. Hence the need for careful explanation to children just learning to read.

This long vowel “a” sound has many different options in English: the “ea” in steak makes the sound; so does the “ai” in pain; and so on.

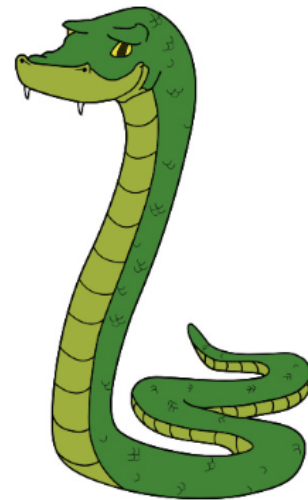
So we are not dealing with simple sounds, but complex sounds – effectively digraphs (**two letters making one sound**).

Common long vowel patterns

The pattern is something like this: **when there are two vowels, one of which is a final e** (as in cake), **the first vowel is normally long and the e is silent**.

As an example of this pattern, consider the long vowel “a” (a-e):

- ace, pace, race, space
- blade, fade, grade, made, spade
- age, cage, page, rage, stage
- bake, fake, make, shake, **snake**, take
- came, dame, flame, game, name, same
- date, fate, gate, hate, mate, plate
- brave, cave, gave, rave, save, wave
- etc



The other major categories (of the long vowel “a”) are:

- **ai**: brain, chain, drain, laid, maid, paid, raid, main, nail, pain, rain, sail, snail, train
- **ay**: bay, day, hay, lay, pay, play, ray, say, stay

And hundreds more.

There is a much smaller list of others: particularly the tiny group of “ea” words (break, great, steak), as well as “ey” (they, obey). Other options like “ei” (vein, rein) and “ei” (eight,

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_e

³ Chaucer, G. (c1400) *The Canterbury Tales*, L328

weight) are too confusing for beginning readers. They need to come later, carefully spaced out to avoid overload in young minds trying to memorise a pattern.

This pattern (long vowel/consonant/e) applies also to “i”, “o” and “u”⁴.

eg bike ice mice prize rice slide

eg bone cone joke nose phone rope

eg cute huge rule tube tune use

Exceptions

We must unfortunately mention here the tiny number of words that *break* the rule (of long vowel/consonant/silent e):

are, come, done, give, have, gone, glove, live, love, move, one, some, sure, where, there, whose

These are *all* very old words. Why don't they follow the usual pattern?

The most common explanation, at least for the “o” words, is that they were originally written with a “u” (cume, luvu, unu, sun – for come, love, one, son). Medieval scribes and their readers had trouble distinguishing the written form of “u” (too much like v or i or n) – so they changed the letter – “u” became “o”. The original form of “love” was luvu (from the Old English *lufu*). When transcribed with an “o”, the spelling changed to love. This made it easier to read (in hand written manuscripts). The letter “o” is the only letter in history to have kept its original form since the time before the Greeks – it is easy to see and to write. However, the word “love” kept the original pronunciation (“u”), causing endless confusion down the years.⁵

These exceptions need to be taught very carefully.

How does Ziptales teach long vowels?

The danger with teaching long vowels is to get into the complexities (ai, ay, ei, ea, ey) too soon. As one phonics specialist advises:

“Begin instruction with simple, one syllable words. Start with CVCe (consonant-vowel-consonant-e) words [eg cake] since this pattern is an extremely useful and unencumbered [easy to grasp] long vowel pattern.”⁶

⁴ The “e-e” is not featured, as it is a relatively rare pattern (eve, extreme, gene, these).

⁵ Crystal, D. (2018) *Encyclopaedia of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press

⁶ Blevins, W. (2005)

Since the pattern of long vowel/consonant/silent e words is a very large word family (hundreds of really common words), it is a logical place to start. The complex ones can be addressed later.



Easy Readers, in its “Long Vowels” module, offers a set of decodable readers teaching the long vowels. The emphasis in these stories is on the simple, one syllable words – a useful starting point.

The text is “controlled” as much as possible, while avoiding the dangers of too much babyish repetition. The author strives for narrative interest, surprise, and humour.



The first story in the set is “The Amazing Ape”. This quirky little narrative focuses on the interaction between a boy (Jake) and an ape as they enjoy a series of adventures and make friends.

The text has just 136 words. Of those only 13 are more than one syllable (walking, looked, funny, chased, etc). All the vocabulary is taken from a reserve of words that all five to six year olds will know. The rhymes focus attention on the long vowel/consonant/e ... lake/ape, case/face, same/game and so on.

The six lessons in this series (“Long vowels”) cover all the four main long vowels (**a-e** as in lake, **i-e** as in bike, **o-e** as in joke, **u-e** as in rule) and offer two revision lessons which revisit all of them.

Preparation for reading each story should involve pre reading (and selectively analysing) the text, with teachers commenting on the main teaching point – the long vowel and following silent e – and dealing with any other words (eg amazing or whenever) that might need preparation. After that, it is time to allow children to enjoy the stories – multiple times – watching and listening to the use of these long vowels in context.

NB The **Easy Readers** long vowels series include *two* sets of lessons: ‘**Long vowels**’ (this set of six) and ‘**Simple Vowel Digraphs**’ - which covers **ea** as in peas, **ee** as in see, **oa** as in goat, **oo** as in soon, and **ou** as in sound (another six lessons). They are described in PD 9.

It is important to know about these two sets of lessons, which taken together cover a large number of the teaching points needed for long vowels.