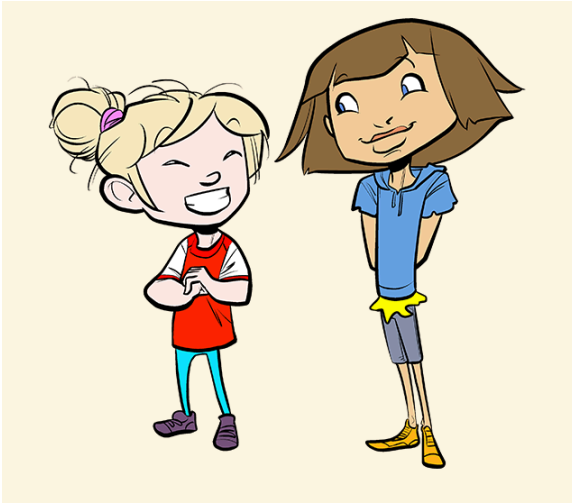# PD 8   VOWEL CONSONANT DIGRAPHS

It is not surprising that a blended sound in words can involve both vowels *and* consonants. Here are examples:

sister   **clown**

In "sister" we see the digraph **er** in a very old noun[1].

The "er" is also often to be found in a very common morphological[2] unit - the English suffix "**er**" … think of banker, follower, owner, player, thinker, worker – all signifying "one who does ____". There are also the **er** endings used as a sign of a comparison: better, nicer, prettier, smarter, sweeter, taller, thinner, etc.

Or another old word: "clown"[3].

These are examples of what are called **vowel consonant** digraphs.

A digraph is when two letters[4] make one sound.

How common are these words?

Extremely common.

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[1] Mid thirteenth century *systir*, from the Norse and German.
[2] Morphology is the study of the individual parts of a word with distinct meanings eg unreadable has three morphemes - **un-** meaning "not", **read** – the root word (the verb), and **able**, meaning capable of.
[3] From the Old German *klunne* (pronounced "clune").
[4] Di means "two" and graph means letter.

Digraphs with the digraph "ow"

Ow making the long "ow" sound as in *owl*:

> bow, cow, coward, crowd, crown, down, elbow, flower, fowl, how, now, **owl**, powder, somehow, tower, towel, town, vow

Ow making the short "o" sound as in *window*:

> arrow, blow, borrow, bow, fellow, follow, grow, hollow, know, shadow, shallow, show, slow, snow, sorrow, throw, tow, **window**, yellow

Amazingly, these two variants (an identical vowel consonant cluster with two different sounds) have been there for centuries. In Chaucer, we read

> "His bootes souple / his hors in greet estaat/
> **Now** certeinly/ he was a fair prelaat" [L203]
> (*His boots supple, his horse in great estate/ Now certainly he was a fair prelate*)[5]

and

> "Valerian seyde / two corones / han we /**Snow** white and Rose reed" [L253]
> (*Valerian said two crowns had we/ Snow White and Rose Red*)

Both versions of "ow" are within a few lines of one another.

Why?

It's because these words come from different places.

Let's take the threesome **bow** (as in bend low), **bow** (as in bow and arrow) and **bow** (as in the forward part of a boat). Bow (to bend) comes from Old English *bugan*. Bow (the thing you fit an arrow to) is from Old English *boga*. Bow (on a boat) is from Old German *boog*[6]. Three different origins and three different meanings for words with identical spellings. All three words are at least 1,000 years old. Not surprisingly, there are slightly different ways of saying these simple little words.

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[5] Chaucer, G. (c1400) *The Canterbury Tales*
[6] *Oxford Concise English Dictionary of Etymology*

English is like that. The good news is that mostly these words are well-known by children long before they get to school. A sentence or two about the long history of English should set their minds at rest. Avoid too much information. Fascinating as the history is, it's not the prime target of instruction, and could be confusing.

Words with the digraph "er"

The digraph can be in a "free morpheme"[7] (a complete stand alone word) like **water**:

> after, anger, answer, brother, cover, dinner, eager, enter, fever, fewer, finger, hover, inner, ladder, layer, letter, loser, lower, matter, meter, mother, never, number, order, other, outer, over, paper, power, rather, river, ruler, sister, soccer, super, tiger, tower, under, user, wonder

It can be a suffix at the end of a root word like **baker** (bake + *er*), to indicate action (one who does the action):

> banker, boxer, buyer, **dancer**, diner, drummer, farmer, gardener, keeper, manager, officer painter, potter, rider, runner, singer, speaker, teacher, trainer, writer

The digraph can be a suffix at the end of a word to indicate a comparison (eg big, bigger, biggest):

> better, bigger, cheaper, closer, faster, greater, harder, happier, higher, hotter, longer, louder, nicer, richer, shorter, smaller, smarter, taller, younger

The "er" ending has a wide range of uses. It can be found in verbs (cover, enter, offer), nouns (boxer, rider, tower) and adjectives (fewer, truer, wider).

Words with the digraph "ay"

This digraph combines vowel "a" with the semivowel "y". Fortunately, this digraph pattern is very stable. It always makes the sound "ai". Here are examples:

> away, bay, clay, day, delay, dismay, display, freeway, hay, holiday, lay, May, pay, play, railway, ray, replay, say, slay, someday, spray, stay, sway, tray, way

Words with the digraph "ar"

This digraph combines vowel "a" with the consonant "r". It too is quite stable – always pronounced the same way. Here are examples:

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[7] Where the word cannot be reduced any further and makes sense in its own right.

bar, beggar, calendar, car, cigar, collar, dollar, far, guitar, jar, lunar, particular, popular, scar, similar, solar, star, sugar, tar

Words with the digraph "aw"

This digraph combines vowel "a" with the consonant "w". It is always pronounced the same way. Here are examples:

awe, awful, claw, crawl, draw, fawn, flaw, jaw, jigsaw, lawn, outlaw, paw, raw, saw, seesaw, straw, strawberry, thaw, withdraw

How to teach vowel consonant digraphs?

It is important not to overload children's working memory (see Paper 2) with too much, too soon. These phonetic patterns take time to explain and practise.

It would be a good idea to segment the various families of consonant digraphs and deal with each in a sequential way. Given that some are quite stable patterns, without any irritating exceptions or unexplained variations, this might be a useful order:

er … as in anger, dancer, bigger

ay … as in bay, hay, stay

ar … as in bar, car, star

aw … as in draw, jaw, seesaw

and leave the most confusing for last:

ow … as in cow, owl, towel

ow … as in bow, grow, snow

Teachers will have their favourite techniques, but a lot can be achieved by transferring instruction on the board to tactile manipulation of the letters in words – a sort of bespoke Scrabble. For instance, children could be given a set of "er" cards, "ay" cards, "ar" cards and "aw" cards - plus enough random cards (a, b, c, etc) to enable them to form words. The task could be for a small group to focus on one set of these vowel consonant digraphs and make as many words out of them as they can.
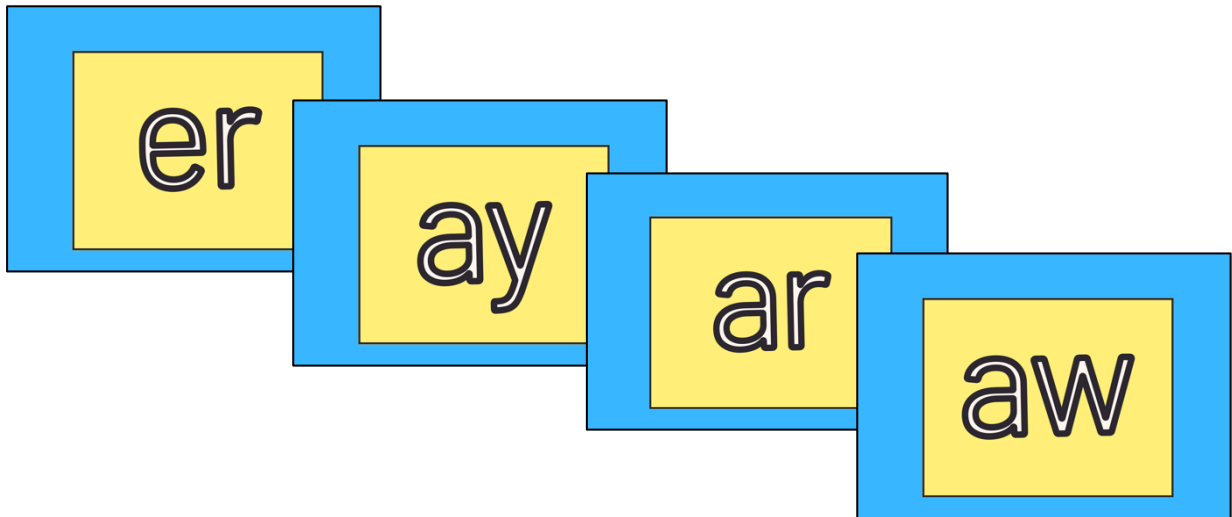
The more children see these phoneme units and manipulate them – saying them, rearranging them (and later writing them) - the more the different letter-sound clusters will bed down in their memory.

## How does Ziptales teach vowel consonant digraphs?

These phonic units are slightly more complex than the earlier lessons, so they are saved till the end of the **Easy Reader** series.

The
lessons start with the relatively obvious and reliable ones – **ay**, **ar** and **aw**.

The point is to show these phonemes in action – inside carefully crafted little stories. We start with a happy piece about holidays in a place called "Rainbow Bay". Then there is a little fantasy about a starfish who loses his sparkles ("The Sparkly Starfish"). Then a jokey one about an "Awful Animal Zoo". Then one about "My Big Sister".

The last two deal with the more challenging issue of the two ways of saying and reading "ow". "Chester the Clown" showcases the **long vowel** version – with a plentiful supply of words like town/frown, down/gown, how/allow and bow to rhyme with "wow".
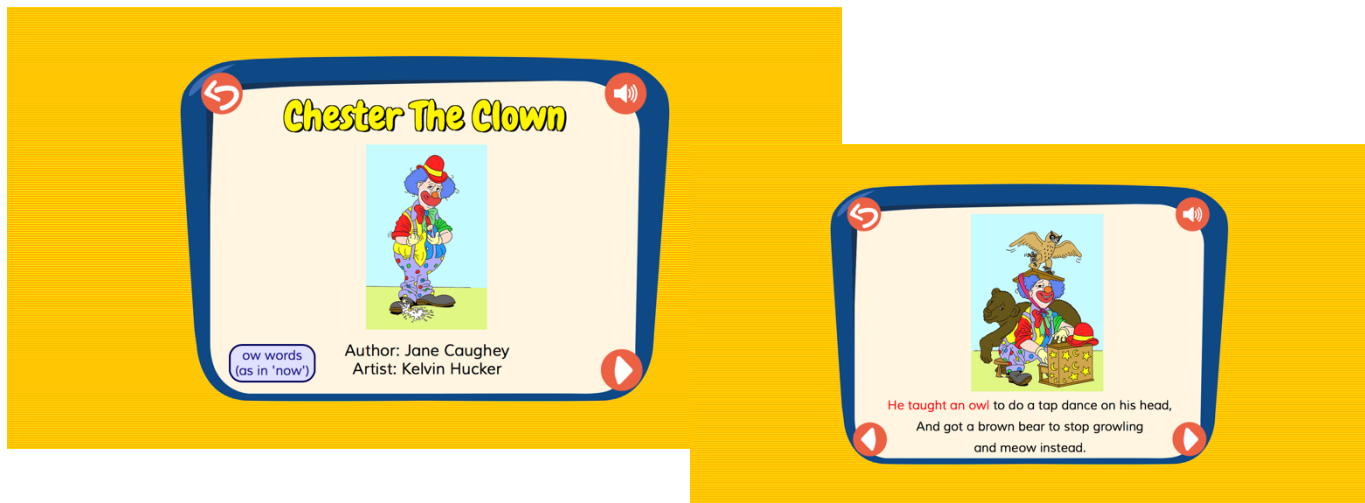
The final story, "What Will I Do Tomorrow?" is all about the **short vowel** variation of 'ow' – glow/rainbow, shadow, follow, come and so on.

The set ends with two fun stories: "The Princess in the Tower" and "A Fun Day at the Farm" – which are composites of *all* the consonant vowel digraphs taught so far.

Once again, some thought has to be put into pre-teaching the lessons. The vocabulary is controlled to the extent that there are few multisyllabic words ("everywhere" is the longest of these) and all words are well-known. Teachers can therefore concentrate their attention on children picking out the digraphs and then seeing them in action.

As a set of entertaining lessons for teaching these tricky phonemes, the **Easy Readers** module is a very worthwhile resource to have on hand.