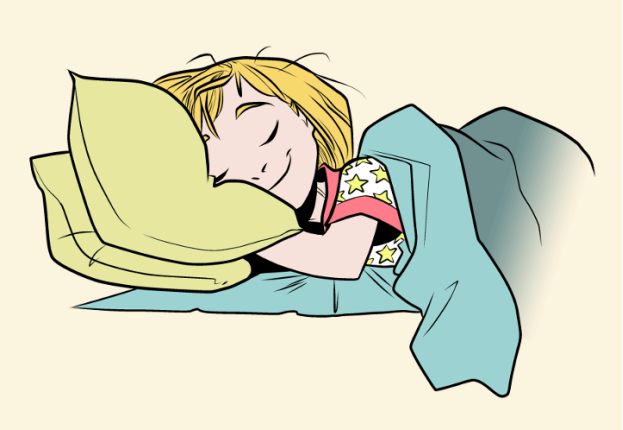
PD 9 VOWEL DIGRAPHS

One of the most common phonetic patterns in English is the **double vowel**, such as:

teeth



dream

and all other variations (of this familiar two vowel cluster).

These **blended vowels**, or "vowel teams", as they are often called, are extremely common. Although they should not the first thing taught in a phonics course, children do need to master them within the first two years.

The good news is that by and large they are phonetically regular.

Let's look at the main patterns now.

Words with the vowel digraph "ee"

agree, bee, bleed, beef, coffee, deep, fee, feed, feet, free, greed, green, keen, keep, knee, meet, need, needle, reef, see, seed, seek, seem, sleep, speed, sweet, teen, three, toffee, **tree**, week, weep

Words with the vowel digraph "ea"

bead, beak, beast, beat, breathe, cheat, clean, cream, disease, each, eager, eagle, east, easy, eat, feat, flea, heap, heat, **jeans**, increase, lead, leaf, leap, leave, mean, meat, neat, peace, peas, plead, please, reach, read, reason, repeat, sea, seam, season, seat, speak, steam, stream, tea, teach, treat, weak

There are also regrettably a small number of words that are irregular (ie the "ea" does *not* make the sound "ee"): break, dead, earth, great, head, heart, steak.

These are all very old words, and that's the reason for the confusion.

For example, the word "heart", though it features the "ea", was originally spelt *herte* (and pronounced "hair-ter")[1]. It is based on the Old English (German) word *heorte*, similar to the modern German *herz*. No "a" at all. The modern spelling "heart" dates from the time just before Shakespeare (fifteenth century). However, while the spelling changed, the sound remained ("hart") - hence the confusion in modern English.

The word "great" was from Old Saxon *grot*. The word "steak" is from Old Norse *steke* (to rhyme with baker). "Earth" was from *ertha*[2]. These are exception words.

They need to be taught separately and explained as words that would have been *originally* pronounced as they are spelt, but over the centuries have changed.

[1] Chaucer spells it this way in *The Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer, G. (1400) *The Canterbury Tales*
[2] *Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* OUP (1996)

Words with the vowel digraph “oa”

boast, boat, coach, cloak, coast, **coat**, float, foam, groan, goat, hoax, load, loaf, loan, moan, moat, oaf, oat, oath, poach, road, roast, soap, throat, toad, toast

There are variations that need to be kept to one side. A following “r” or “l” can deform the pattern producing words like oar and roar (the r changing the sound of the digraph) or goal or foal.

Words with digraph “oo” making a long vowel sound (as in food)

boo, **boot**, booth, brood, broom, choose, coo, doom, droop, fool, goose, hoop, loop, loot, moo, mood, moon, noose, pooch, proof, room, root, smooth, soon, spook, tooth, zoo, zoom

This pattern is the more common one.

Words with digraph “oo” making a short vowel sound (as in book)

This is the less common variation.

book, brook, cook, crook, foot, hood, good, look, rook, sook, wood

These words are not only very old, but reflect the languages from which they were borrowed. For instance, “book” is from Old English *boc* (a short vowel), the word “cook” is from Old English *coc* (meaning to boil or cook), and “look” is from Old Saxon *lokon*[3].

Despite the changes in spelling over the last 1,000 years, the words have kept their short vowel sound.
There are some variations. When the “oo” is followed by an “r” or an “l”, the sound changes. Examples are poor and door (where the following r bends the oo) as well as cool and tool.

[3] *Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*

Words with digraph “ou” (as in sound)

about, aloud, bound, cloud, couch, count, foul, found, ground, hound, hour, house, loud, **mouse**, mountain, mouth, our, out, pout, pound, proud, round, shout, sour, south, sprout, wound [twisted]

There are some variations. The more obvious one involves a following consonant like “r” (flour, pour, tour, your).

The word “wound” also exists in its other meaning of an injury. Once again, there is no real mystery – they are different words. “Wound” (cut) comes from Old English *wund* (injury), while “wound” (twisted) comes from Old Saxon *windan* (twist). Two different words – two different word origins – two different pronunciations (though the *same* spelling)[4].

There are also other very old words – could (from Old English *cuth*), would (Old English *wolde*), cousin (from the old French *cosin*), court (from the old French *corte*) and young (from the old Saxon *jong*). These need to be taught as exceptions.

Why the irregularities?

It is only fair to acknowledge that there ***are*** irregularities - but they are there for historical reasons. As one academic, Dr Strelluf of Warwick University, has said, “As a rule of thumb, if a spelling is weird, it’s probably because English pronunciation [of that word has] changed [over the centuries].”[5]

In the time of Chaucer (fourteenth century), the words food, good, and blood would all have rhymed. In the next two centuries all this changed, with the so-called “Great Vowel Shift”[6]. As a result of the Black Death and mass migration to London, the sound of English shifted, with many short vowels becoming long vowels – like bite (previously pronounced “beet”), mouse (previously “moos”) and wife (previously “weef”)[7].

However, when Caxton started his printing press (in 1476), books began to be printed in large numbers. Of course they included the old (medieval) spellings. The sound of the language was changing, but the books had been printed, so the old spellings were locked in. By Shakespeare’s time, there was a considerable mismatch between spelling and oral language. It is still troubling us today.

The best approach is to emphasise that most patterns are quite stable. It is best to start with the more regular ones: **ee**, **ea,** and **oa** are largely reliable. Best to lead children into the variations (and exceptions) very gradually.

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[4] *Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*
[5] https://www.discoveryuk.com/mysteries/what-was-the-great-vowel-shift-and-why-did-it-happen/
[6] Crystal, D. (1995) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, CUP
[7] Crystal, D. (1995)

How does Ziptales teach vowel consonant digraphs?

These phonic units in the **Easy Reader** series need a bit of explaining.

The sequence is as follows:

ea (as in beat) … "What Did I Hear?"
ee (as in tree) … "Deep in the Jungle"
oa (as in goat) … "The Grumpy Goat"
oo (short vowel as in book) … "Looking at Books"
oo (long vowel as in school) … "Cool School"
ou (as in cloud) … "Guess What I Found?"

The first two lessons are fairly straightforward with their emphasis on the "**ea**" words – leave, clean, neat, cheat, teacher, read, tea, peas, beans, jeans, dreams – and "**ee**" words – deep, see, tree, chimpanzee, knee, teeth.

It might be worth explaining to children that when the ea is followed by "r", the "r" distorts the sound – hear, near, and ear. Fortunately, these words are all very familiar, and it should be sufficient to point out that this is a regular variation (as explained above).
With "The Grumpy Goat" there are fortunately no awkward variations. The story teaches familiar words like goat, moan, groan, soap, boat, toad, road, loads – all wrapped up in a fun story about a silly goat.

With the next two stories, we move into more complex territory. It is necessary to show children that for historical reasons there are words with a ***short*** vowel "oo" sound (eg book) as well as words with a ***long*** vowel "oo" sound (eg school).

The backstory of these variations would be too much for most teachers, let alone children. Suffice to say that there are *two patterns* – and all we are talking about is the way they are pronounced – *not* the way they are spelled, which is quite regular.

With the “ou”, the dominant pronunciation is the long vowel (eg cloud). This is the one taught in “Guess What I Found?”.

“Guess What I Found?”

It is best for teachers to prepare each of the stories by printing out the full script and then analysing it carefully, to see how it can be aligned with other preparatory work on these vowel digraphs. A little preparation, making sure in particular that any “difficult” words (eg silvery, wandering, grouchy - in “Guess What I Found?”) are introduced first, is an excellent way to lead into the fun of using the story. It is good to do it as a class. Once children are familiar with it, they will benefit from rereading it themselves.

These resources are a wonderful supplement to other class work on these vital phonemes.