

The English Alphabetic Code

- Slash marks /ai/ mainly denote *single sound units* (**phonemes**). *Letters and letter combinations* (**graphemes**) appear in single apostrophes 'ay'.
- References to short vowel sounds relate to the sounds as in 'at, enter, in, on, up' denoted as: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/ and said in a 'staccato' manner - as opposed to references to the long vowel sounds commonly denoted as: /ai/, /ee/, /igh/, /oa/, /yoo/ as in 'aid, eel, night, oak, rescue'.

simple code		complex code						teaching points	
phonemes (mainly)	graphemes: spelling variations of the 42+ phonemes and key words							Introduces a simple code of at least one letter/s-sound correspondence for each of the 42+ sounds of speech of the English language. Then teach further spellings and their pronunciation variations.	
/s/	S snake	-ss glass	-ce palace	-se house	ce cents city bicycle	ci certain circle lacy	cy sc scent scissors scythe		-st- castle ps pseudonym
/a/	a apple							<p>*For letter 'a', teach "try the short vowel sound /a/ first, if that does not sound right then try the long vowel /ai/ sound".</p> <p>*Some people pronounce the 'a' in some words as if it were /ar/: e.g. path p-ar-th; grass g-r-ar-s. It can be /ar/ e.g. father</p>	
/t/	t tent	-tt letter	-ed skipped					<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its short sound.</p> <p>*Past tense of verbs leads to 'ed' graphemes for /t/, /d/, /e+d/.</p>	
/i/	i insect	-y cymbals						<p>*Letters 'i' and 'y' and the sounds they represent have very close links. Here the letter 'y' acts as a vowel-letter and vowel-sound.</p> <p>* End graphemes 'y', 'ey' and 'ie' sound between /i/ and /ee/.</p>	
/p/	p pan	-pp puppet						<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its short sound.</p>	

/n/	n net	-nn bonnet	kn knot	gn gnome	-ine engine					<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Some people would refer to 'silent k' or 'silent g'; others prefer to say that 'kn' and 'gn' are digraphs for /n/.</p>
/k/	k kit	c cat	-ck duck	ch chameleon	qu bouquet	que plaque				<p>*Letter 'c' represents a /k/ sound when preceding the letters 'a', 'o' and 'u'.</p> <p>*<i>Short</i> words with <i>short</i> vowels usually end with 'ck' and this grapheme never begins words.</p>
/e/	e egg	ea head	ai said							<p>*When reading short unknown words with single letter 'e', teach "try the <i>short</i> vowel /e/ sound first, if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel /ee/ sound".</p>
/h/	h hat									<p>*When letter names are taught, point out that the name for the letter 'h' is pronounced "aitch".</p>
/r/	r rat	-rr arrow	wr write	rh rhino						<p>*Some people would refer to 'silent w' or 'silent h'; others prefer to say that 'wr' and 'rh' are digraphs (graphemes) representing the /r/ sound (phoneme).</p>
/m/	m map	-mm hammer	-mb thumb	-mn columns	-me welcome					<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Some people would refer to 'silent b' or silent 'n'; others prefer to say that 'mb' and 'mn' are digraphs for /m/.</p>
/d/	d dig	-dd puddle	-ed rained							<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Past tense of verbs leads to 'ed' graphemes for /t/, /d/, /e+d/.</p>
/g/	g girl	-gg juggle	gu guitar	gh ghost	-gue catalogue					<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Letter 'u' in 'gu' acts as a block between the letters 'g' and 'i'.</p>
/o/	o octopus	wa watch	qua qualify	alt salt						<p>*For 'o', teach "try the <i>short</i> vowel /o/ sound first, if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel /oa/ sound".</p> <p>*Alert the reader that the graphemes 'w' or 'qu' preceding a single letter 'a' can indicate that 'a' represents the /o/ sound.</p>

/u/	u under	o son	-ou touch	ough thorough						<p>*For 'u', teach "try the <i>short</i> vowel /u/ sound first, if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel /yoo/ sound".</p> <p>*The letter 'u' is sometimes a long /oo/ sound: e.g. flu, judo, truth, Ruth, Pluto.</p>
/l/	l ladder	-ll shell								<p>*To make the /l/ sound, roll up the tongue and say "ul".</p> <p>*Short words with <i>short</i> vowels usually end with 'l' as in bell.</p> <p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p>
/ul/ schwa		-le table	-il pencil	-al hospital	-el camel					<p>*Teach the 'schwa' effect involving /l/ through words such as: little, table, pupil, cymbal, label (pronounced close to "ul"). Teach that literal sounding out when reading, however, helps with spelling: e.g. h-o-s-p-i-t-<u>a</u>-l.</p>
/f/	f fish	-ff cliff	ph photo	-gh laugh						<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Short words with <i>short</i> vowel sounds usually end with 'ff' as in off and cliff.</p>
/b/	b bat	-bb rabbit	bu building							<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p>
/j/	j jug	-ge cabbage	ge gi gy gerbil giraffe gymnast	-dge fridge						<p>*Letters e, i or y alert the reader that the preceding letter 'g' <i>might</i> represent the /j/ sound. (This is often referred to as 'soft g'.)</p> <p>*Words <i>ending</i> with the /j/ sound are spelt with 'ge' or 'dge'. The grapheme 'dge' follows single letter, short vowel sounds.</p>
/y/	y yak									<p>*Teach early on that letter 'y' represents 3 sounds as in 'yes, my mummy'. It is also /i/ as in 'crystal'. It is interchangeable sometimes for /i/ and /igh/ and letters 'ie' e.g. cherry, cherries</p>
/ai/	ai aid	ay tray	a table	ae sundae	a-e cakes	-ey prey	eigh eight	-ea break		<p>*The 'a-i' as in 'baking' and the 'a-y' as in 'baby' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ai/.</p> <p>*Grapheme 'ea' for the /ai/ sound is rare - note the three common words in which it appears: break, steak, great.</p>

/w/	w web	wh wheel								*Letter 'w' preceding vowel graphemes should alert the reader to different possible pronunciations'; (w)a - wasp, wag; (w)ar - warm, wary; (w)or - work. Note: 'what'
/oa/	oa oak	ow bow	o yo-yo	oe oboe	o-e rope	ough dough	eau plateau			*The 'o-i' as in 'poking' and the 'o-y' as in 'pony' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /oa/.
/igh/	-igh night	-ie tie	i behind	-y shy	i-e bike	ei eider				*The 'i-i' as in 'liking' and the 'i-y' as in 'shiny' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /igh/.
/ee/	ee eel	ea eat	e emu	* -y sunny	e-e concrete	-ey key *monkey	-ie chief *movie	-ine sardines		*The 'e-i' as in 'competing' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ee/. *The 'y' in 'sunny' is between the sound /i/ and /ee/. Similarly, so is 'ey' in 'monkey' and 'ie' in 'movie'.
/or/	or fork	aw dawn	au sauce	al chalk	oar oars	oor door	ore snore	our four		*Letter 'w' preceding grapheme 'ar' alerts the reader to pronounce /or/: (w)ar - war, warn, wart, warder. *Sound /w/ as in 'qu' [/k+/w/] also alerts reader to pronounce 'ar' as /or/: (qu)ar - quart, quarter, quartz, quartile.
/z/	z zebra	-zz jazz	-s fries	-se cheese	-ze breeze		/or/	war warm		*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound. *Short words with <i>short</i> vowel sounds end with 'zz' - jazz.
/ng/	-ng gong	-n jungle					↓	augh caught		*The grapheme 'ng' can be pronounced differently according to regional accent and dependent upon the particular word. *In some words, the 'n' and 'g' are pronounced separately. Look out for words like 'danger' and 'bangle'.
/ngk/	-nk ink						quar quarter	ough thought		*Teach 'nk' as if it was <i>one sound unit</i> for reading and spelling purposes even though it is really two; that is: /ng+/k/. Increasingly, this 'sound' may be denoted as /nk/ .
/v/	v violin	-ve dove								*Teach that words ending with the /v/ sound always end with the grapheme 've'.

/oo/	oo book	oul should							*Teach the two sounds represented by the grapheme 'oo' at the same time; short /oo/, long /oo/. *Progress to linking the /oo/ as in 'moon' with the spelling and pronunciation variations of 'ew', 'ue' and 'u-e' - all of which can represent both the long /oo/ sound and the /yoo/ sound.
/oo/	oo moon	-ue blue	u-e flute	-ew crew	-ui fruit	-ou soup	-o move	ough through	
/ks/	-x fox	-ks books	-cks ducks	-kes cakes		/gz/ x exam		-x exact	*Teach the letter 'x' as if it was <i>one sound unit</i> /ks/ whereas it is really two sounds /k+/s/. This is sometimes denoted as /x/. Provide word lists of '-x' words, '-ks', 'cks' and '-kes' words to compare: e.g. fox, boxes, looks, beaks, ducks, likes.
/ch/	ch chair	-tch patch				/chu/ <small>schwa</small> ture picture		-ture vulture	*Grapheme 'tch' indicates a preceding <i>short</i> vowel sound; e.g. witch, fetch, thatch, notch, hutch, watch. *Grapheme 'ch' follows <i>long</i> vowel sounds (bleach, pooch, reaches); but also some common words with <i>short</i> vowels need to be noted: rich, which, such, much, touch . *Grapheme 'ch' follows consonants; e.g. mulch, wrench, pinch.
/sh/	sh shell	ch chef	-ti station	-ci magician	-ssi mission				*Draw attention to 'ti', 'ci', 'ssi' graphemes in long words. *Provide words in groups with the same 'chunk' endings: -tion, -cian, -cial, -ssion, -cious. **Progress to the phoneme /zh/ as in 'television'.
/th/	th thistle								*Teach unvoiced and voiced /th/ together. *Point out the difference with the sounds /f/ and /v/ and study mouth movements of these sounds carefully. Pronouncing /th/, /f/ and /v/ frequently causes confusion because of their similarities.
/th/	th there								
/kw/	qu queen								*In English, the letter 'q' is always followed by the letter 'u' and together they represent two sounds /k+/w/. Treat as <i>one sound unit</i> /kw/ for both reading and spelling purposes when teaching in the early stages. 'qu' is also code for /k/.

/ou/	ou ouch	ow owl	ough plough							*The <i>grapheme</i> 'ou' for the sound /ou/ is never found at the end of a word. *'ough' is a rare grapheme as an /ou/ sound: bough, plough.
/oi/	oi coin	oy toy								*The <i>grapheme</i> 'oi' is never the spelling at the end of a word except in 'coi carp'.
/yoo/	-ue rescue	u unicorn	u-e tube	ew new	eu deuce					*Point out that the graphemes 'ue', 'ew' and 'u-e' are also spellings for the long /oo/ sound. *The 'u-i' as in 'amusing' and the 'u-y' in 'puny' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /y+oo/ which is two phonemes.
/er/	er herbs	ir birthday	ur nurse	ear earth	wor world	schwa /er/ mixer	-our humour	-er theatre		*Letter 'w' preceding 'or' alerts the reader to say "wer..." as in: worm, work, worth. It is /w+/er/. *'er', 'our', 're' can be a schwa /u/: sister, colour, centre.
/ar/	ar star	alm palm	alf half	alv calves	a father					*Mention early on that some people pronounce some words with the 'a' grapheme as the /ar/ sound rather than the /a/ sound: path p-ar-th, glass g-l-ar-s.
/air/	air stairs	are hare	ear bear	ere where						*Teach /air/ along with phoneme /eer/ (below) as there are so many similar or identical graphemes representing /air/ and /eer/ phonemes. Teach the word 'their' as 'their things'.
/eer/	eer cheer	ear ears	ere adhere	ier cashier						See /air/ above.
/zh/	-si vision	-s treasure	-z azure	-g courgette	-ge collage					**Progress to this sound from lessons in the /sh/ sound and its spelling variations. There are no words with the grapheme 'zh' and the letters zh denote the phoneme only.

The complexities of the English Alphabetic Code include:

1. one sound (phoneme) can be represented by one, two, three or four letters: e.g. k, sh, ng, igh, eigh
2. one sound can be represented by different spellings (graphemes): e.g. /**oa**/ is represented by: o, oa, ow, oe, o-e, eau, ough
3. one spelling can represent multiple sounds: e.g. 'ough': /**oa**/ **though**, /**or**/ **thought**, /**oo**/ **through**, /**ou**/ **plough**, /**u**/ **thorough**

General advice for teaching the Alphabetic Code:

- Choose an **order of introduction** of letter/s-sound correspondences to create a version of a **simple code**. Teach around 3 - 5 correspondences per week at first. Provide a **cumulative word bank** (for the simple code) for modelling **blending** all-through-the-word for reading, and **segmenting** all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling. The 'simple code', in effect, is part of the complex code but it is just a 'first step' of introducing the complexities of the English writing system for reading and spelling based on 42+ phonemes (smallest identifiable sounds of speech).
- Keep the simple code revised and begin to introduce **spelling and pronunciation variations** of the complex code at a rate appropriate to the age and stage of the learner. With effective direct teaching, the rate of learning can be surprisingly fast-paced but learners need to write more in the later stages which can slow down the pace of introducing new code information. Allow time, then, for consolidation and assessment.
- The Alphabetic Code is not an 'exact science' and **accents need to be taken into account** at all times along with the notion of 'modifying pronunciations' when decoding to reach the regional or preferred pronunciation of the target word.
- Modifying pronunciations also helps to **raise awareness of the 'schwa effect'** (unstressed syllables) whereby in reality the sound /u/ is the spoken translation of the written code in words such as 'sofa' (sofu), 'faster' (fastu), 'little' (littul), 'around' (uround). The reverse of this is the need to be aware of the spelling possibilities when segmenting spoken words for writing - particularly with regard to the schwa effect. The ability to spell accurately relies on a growing knowledge of **word associations** (noting words with the same spelling and sound variations) and this knowledge takes much longer to acquire than learning to decode well for reading. Always emphasise the **relationship between sounds and letters** when teaching spelling *rather than* relying on visual memory of letter order – and focus on learning and recalling **word banks** of the common words of the spelling alternatives.

Please note: This is just one practical way of illustrating the English Alphabetic Code and is not definitive