

Debbie Hepplewhite's simple to complex Alphabetic Code overview

- 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 'rain, tree, night, coat, statue'.

Key to the 12 units of Debbie's international online synthetic phonics programme:

units 1-5	mainly simple code with options to extend	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th		
6-12	/air/, /eer/, /zh/, split digraphs, complex code	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th

simple code		complex code						teaching points		
phonemes and key words	graphemes: spelling variations of the 44+ phonemes and key words									
/s/ s snake	s sun	-ss kiss	-ce fence	-se house	ce cent city cycle	ci certain circle lacy	cy cy	sc scent science scythe	-st- castle ps psyche	<p>Debbie's programme introduces a simple code of at least one letter/s-sound correspondence for each of the 44+ sounds of speech of the English language. It then expands to teach further spellings and their pronunciation variations.</p> <p>*Short words ending with the /s/ sound with <i>short</i> medial vowel sounds usually end with double letters 'ss' - as in 'kiss'.</p> <p>*Sound out double consonants as one sound only.</p> <p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Letters e, i or y alert the reader that the preceding 'c' will represent the /s/ sound. (This is 'soft c'.)</p>
/a/ a apple	a ant								<p>*For 'a', teach "try the <i>short</i> vowel sound /a/ first, if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> 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</p>	
/t/ t tent	t tin	-tt otter	-ed jumped						<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>	
/i/ i igloo	i ink	*-y pony	-y cygnet	*-ey honey	*-ie movie				<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 pen	p pot	-pp poppy								*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.
/n/ n nut	n net	-nn sunny	kn knock	gn gnat	-ine jasmine					*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound. *Some people would refer to 'silent k' or 'silent g'; others prefer to say that 'kn' and 'gn' are digraphs for /n/.
/k/ k kitten	c cat	k kit	-ck sack	ch chemist	qu croquet	que plaque				*Letter 'c' represents a /k/ sound when preceding the letters 'a', 'o' and 'u'. *Short words with <i>short</i> vowels usually end with 'ck' and this grapheme never begins words.
/e/ e enter	e egg	ea head								*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".
/h/ h hen	h hat									*When letter names are taught, point out that the name for the letter 'h' is pronounced "aitch".
/r/ r rabbit	r rat	-rr curry	wr wrist	rh rhyme						*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).
/m/ m map	m mop	-mm hammer	-mb thumb	-mn hymn	-me some					*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound. *Some people would refer to 'silent b' or silent 'n'; others prefer to say that 'mb' and 'mn' are digraphs for /m/.
/d/ d dog	d drum	-dd ladder	-ed played							*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound. *Past tense of verbs leads to 'ed' graphemes for /t/, /d/, /e+d/.
/g/ g gate	g goat	-gg toggle	gu guitar	gh ghost	-gue rogue					*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound. *Letter 'u' in 'gu' acts as a block between the letters 'g' and 'i'.

/o/ on o octopus	o ostrich	wa wasp	qua squash	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/ up u umbrella	u under	o dove	-ou touch	ough borough						<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/ ladder l	l leg	-ll bell								<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 'll' 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		-le table	-il pencil	-al animal	-el label					<p>*Teach the 'schwa' effect involving /l/ through words such as: little, table, pupil, cymbal, label (pronounced close to "ul").</p> <p>Teach that literal sounding out when reading, however, helps with spelling: e.g. h-o-s-p-i-t-a-l.</p>
/f/ feather f	f fish	-ff cuff	ph photo	-gh rough						<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.</p>
/b/ bat b	b ball	-bb robber	bu build							<p>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound.</p>
/j/ jug j	j jam	-ge barge	ge gi gy germ magic gymnastics	-dge hedge						<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'.</p>
/y/ yellow y	y yam									<p>*Teach early on that letter 'y' represents 3 sounds as in 'yes, my mummy' and is often interchangeable with the phonemes /i/ and /igh/ - and the letter 'i'.</p>

/ai/ ai aid	ai aim	ay tray	a able	ae sundae	a-e cake	-ey grey	eigh eight	-ea great	<p>*The 'a-i' as in 'baking' 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 wind	w web	wh wheel							<p>*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'</p>
/oa/ oa oak	oa oats	ow snow	o echo	oe toe	o-e rope	ough dough	eau plateau		<p>*The 'o-i' as in 'poking' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /oa/.</p>
/igh/ igh light	-igh night	-ie pie	i kind	-y fly	i-e bike	ei eider			<p>*The 'i-i' as in 'liking' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /igh/.</p>
/ee/ ee bee	ee tree	ea east	e she	* -y rainy	e-e swede	* -ey key donkey	* -ie chief movie	-ine sardine	<p>*The 'e-i' as in 'competing' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ee/.</p> <p>*The 'y' in 'rainy' is between the sound /i/ and /ee/. Similarly, so is 'ey' in 'donkey' and 'ie' in 'movie'. [Also in /i/ row.]</p>
/or/ or fork	or orbit	aw awful	au sauce	al chalk	oar oar	oor door	ore snore	our four	<p>*Letter 'w' preceding grapheme 'ar' alerts the reader to pronounce /or/: (w)ar - war, warn, wart, warder.</p> <p>*Sound /w/ as in 'qu' [/k+/w/] also alerts reader to pronounce 'ar' as /or/: (q)ar - quart, quarter, quartz, quartile.</p>
/z/ z zip	z zoo	-zz buzz	-s is, his	-se cheese	-ze breeze		/or/ fork	war warm	<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 end with 'zz' - jazz.</p>
/ng/ ng ring	-ng wing	-n lynx						augh taught	<p>*The grapheme 'ng' can be pronounced differently according to regional accent and dependent upon the particular word.</p> <p>*In some words, the 'n' and 'g' are pronounced separately</p>
/ngk/ nk drink	-nk sink						quar quarter	ough bought	<p>*Teach 'nk' as if it was one sound unit for reading and spelling purposes even though it is really two; that is: /ng+/k/. Increasingly, this 'sound' may be denoted as /nk/.</p>

/v/ v van	v vet	-ve dove								*Teach that words ending with the /v/ sound always end with the grapheme 've'.
/oo/ oo cook	oo hook	oul could								*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	oo spoon	-ue blue	u-e flute	-ew brew	-ui fruit	-ou soup	-o move	ough through		
/ks/ x box	-x fox	-ks books	-k-s cakes			/gz/ x existence		-x exit		*Teach the letter 'x' as if it was <i>one sound unit</i> /ks/ whereas it is really two sounds /k+/s/. This is often denoted as /xl/. Provide word lists of '-x' words, '-ks' words and '-kes' words to compare: e.g. fox, boxes, oxen; looks, books, beaks, likes.
/ch/ ch chair	ch chin	-tch patch				/chu/ <small>schwa</small> ture venture		-ture picture		*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 which need to be noted: rich, which, such, much, touch. *Grapheme 'ch' follows consonants; e.g. mulch, wrench, pinch.
/sh/ sh shell	sh ship	ch chef	-ti station	-ci special	-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 moth	th bath									*Teach unvoiced and voiced /th/ together. *Point out the difference with the sounds /f/ and /v/ and study mouth movements of these sounds carefully.
/th/ th this	th that									Pronouncing /th/, /f/ and /v/ frequently causes confusion because of their similarities.

/kw/ qu queen	qu quilt									*In English, the letter 'q' is always followed by the letter 'u' and together they represent two sounds /k+/w/. Treat as one sound unit /kw/ (usually denoted /qu/) for both reading and spelling purposes when teaching in the early stages.
/ou/ ou out	ou shout	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 oil	oi coin	oy oyster								*The <i>grapheme</i> 'oi' is never at the end of a word except in 'coi carp'.
/yoo/ ue statue	u unicorn	-ue rescue	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' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ue/ (yoo).
/er/ er her	er herbs	ir girl	ur purse	ear earth	wor worm	<small>schwa</small> er sister	-our colour	-re centre		*Letter 'w' preceding 'or' alerts the reader to say "wer..." as in: worm, work, worth. *‘er’, ‘our’, ‘re’ sound like a schwa /u/: sister, colour, centre.
/ar/ ar arm	ar arch	alm palm	alf calf	alv calves	(a) (path)					*Mention early on that some people pronounce some words with the 'a' grapheme as the /ar/ sound rather than the /a/ sound: path p- <i>ar</i> -th, glass g-l- <i>ar</i> -s.
/air/ air air	air chair	are care	ear bear	ere there						*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 beer	eer cheer	ear ears	ere here	ier pier						See /air/ above.
/zh/ television	-si vision	-s measure	-z azure	-g courgette	-ge collage	note: *-y, *-ey, *-ie are pronounced between /i/ and /ee/ when these graphemes are word-endings so they appear in both /i/ and /ee/ rows.				**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**

These complexities are taught explicitly and the Alphabetic Code is taught systematically with Debbie's international online synthetic phonics programme:

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**. (See left-hand column for Debbie's version). Teach around 3 - 5 correspondences per week. 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 44+ 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.
- The Alphabetic Code is not an 'exact science' and **accents need to be taken into account** at all times along with the notion of 'tweaking pronunciations' when decoding to reach the regional or preferred pronunciation of the target word.
- Tweaking 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.