

What is 'synthetic phonics' and 'analytic phonics' teaching?

Some people think that 'synthetic phonics' refers only to the process of *sounding out and blending* words to decode them. Certainly, the proper term for sounding out and blending is 'synthesising'. Some people think that 'analytic phonics' refers only to the process of 'analysing' a whole word by *breaking it up* into its component phonic parts.

Such simplistic descriptions of 'synthetic' and 'analytic' phonics, however, are totally misleading because much fuller definitions and understanding of 'synthetic phonics' and 'analytic phonics' reveal huge differences in the TEACHING PRINCIPLES of the two approaches.

On reading the following descriptions of the synthetic and analytic phonics *teaching principles*, you will see that it is actually impossible by these definitions to claim to have an approach which can be simultaneously 'synthetic phonics' and 'analytic phonics'. The two approaches are fundamentally opposing.

Worryingly, one does not have to look far to see programmes claiming to support both 'synthetic phonics' and 'analytic phonics'. Be wary of such claims and study the contents of all programmes carefully. One has to ascertain whether references to 'synthetic phonics' and 'analytic phonics' relate to the simpler definitions of 'synthesising' and 'analysing' (above) or to the full 'teaching principles' as described below:

Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles

- used in countries like Germany and Austria – taught before expecting children to read books
- teaches letter/s-sound correspondences at a quick pace (around one a day) and immediately teaches how to blend the sounds for reading e.g. c-a-t is cat, b-u-s is bus, s-t-o-p is stop
- teaches phonemic awareness so that the sounds can be identified all-through-the-word and written e.g. cat is c-a-t, bus is b-u-s, stop is s-t-o-p, boat is b-oa-t
- teaches main digraphs (letter combinations) – for blending and segmenting (identifying the sounds all-through-the-word)
- teaches irregular keywords (tricky words) – blending them but noting the regular and irregular/unusual parts
- uses decodable texts initially – free choice of books when there is fluency
- has blending all-through-the-word as the first and main strategy for reading unknown words
- word patterns covered at a later stage – for spelling rather than for reading

Analytic Phonics Teaching Principles - not recommended!

- starts with whole words learnt by global shape (initial sight vocabulary) and books
- uses picture cues, initial letter cues and context information for guessing words
- uses text that has a repetitive, predictable sentence – picture gives clue for the new word(s) introduced on that page
- gradually introduces the alphabet letter names and sounds and tends to focus on the initial letter to help with word identification (often '*check the first letter with the word that you guessed*')
- segmenting and blending demonstrated away from text
- keyword sight vocabulary emphasised – taught visually
- blending used as the last reading strategy instead of the first strategy - word patterns covered at a later stage