

An alphabetic code chart can show us the main spelling alternatives for all the smallest sounds that we can identify in our speech. There are 44+ sounds in the English language and over 150 main spelling alternatives (letters and letter groups) which are code for the sounds:

How do we teach reading and writing?

Phonics

The English writing system is based on an **alphabetic code** – that is, the relationship between the smallest sounds we can identify in the spoken language - and the letters, and letter groups, which **are code for** those sounds.

When we say the word “**phonics**”, for example, there are **six** sounds that we can identify (*hear*) from beginning to end of the *spoken* word. We spell that particular word, however, with **seven** letters:

We ‘hear’ /f/ /o/ /n/ /i/ /k/ /s/ for which the written code is **ph-o-n-i-c-s**

Note: We use the ‘slash marks’ / / to indicate when we mean the **sounds**.

The core skills of spelling and reading

Sound to print

Starting with *sound* (the whole *spoken* word), we identify the individual sounds all-through-the-*spoken*-word and **encode** the sounds into *print* (the written word). This is the technical skill for **SPELLING**.

Note: The proficient adult spelling **skill** is an *encoding process* as described above where the sounds all through the spoken word are identified. *Eventually* we add to that skill the *convention* of relaying the spelling of a word to another person letter-by-letter using the letter *names*. To **tell** someone the spelling of *phonics* would be ‘pee, aitch, oa, en, igh, see, ess’.

Print to sound

Starting with *print* (the *written* word), we **decode** the print into *sound* (*sounding out* the letters and letter groups and blending the sounds to discern, or hear, and say the word). This is the technical skill for **READING**.

This means that the **alphabetic code** is **reversible**.

The core skill of handwriting

The third core skill that teachers need to teach well is handwriting. This is required to complete the spelling skill for writing the words.

Note: An extension of spelling, writing and expressing ideas is also to learn to touch-type if possible.

Some sounds, like /ee/, have many spelling alternatives, whereas other sounds, like /t/, have far fewer. Look for the sound /a/ on the main alphabetic code chart. How many spelling alternatives are shown which are code for the sound /a/? (Answer: One. It is a as in apple.)

Not all languages have such complex codes. The Spanish language, for example, has around 24 sounds and only a few spelling alternatives for those sounds. It is much easier to teach reading and writing in Spanish compared to English.

spelling alternatives in key words				
ee	ea	e	-y	e-e
eel 	eat 	emu 	sunny 	concrete
-ey	-ey	-ie	-ie	-ing
key 	monkey 	chief 	movie 	sardines

To ‘hear the sounds’ and get free alphabetic code charts, go to www.phonicsinternational.com

What else is involved with teaching reading and writing?

The role of phonics

Systematic and incidental phonics teaching equips learners with the alphabetic code knowledge and the technical skills for reading, spelling and writing – but not the thought and communication processes.

Phonics teaching is very important because it teaches children the links between the sounds of speech and the letters and letter groups which are code for those sounds – rather than leaving children to ‘pick them up’ for themselves. Many children have not been able to read and spell well because, in the past, teachers were not trained to teach phonics in much detail, or at all. Some children learnt to read and write well without explicit phonics teaching – but many others didn’t!

Research and leading-edge practice has shown that all children can learn to read, spell and write much better when we carefully teach the alphabetic code for reading and spelling daily in small, systematic steps from simple beginnings – building up knowledge of the complex alphabetic code over time.

Year One Phonics Screening Check

The UK government has worked closely with teachers and advisors to establish a national phonics screening check in England for children at the end of Year One. There are 40 words to read: 20 real words and 20 non-words (the non-words are shown next to pictures of little ‘aliens’). A benchmark is set (for example, 32 out of 40 words read correctly) as a general aim to guide teachers and parents regarding the national expectation. The children read the words at their own pace, one-to-one with their class teacher, and results are reported to parents.

Language comprehension

The importance of talk

Fundamentally important to the teaching of reading and writing is the level of ‘**language comprehension**’ – that is, the individual’s *understanding* of language whether written or spoken.

This is the result of all language activities from birth meaning that listening to and talking with family members and friends in the home and wider afield during social occasions is extremely important. Language activities in the school are massively important too but the seeds of ‘comprehension’ start in the home with talk, talk, talk. The more ‘talk’ the better!

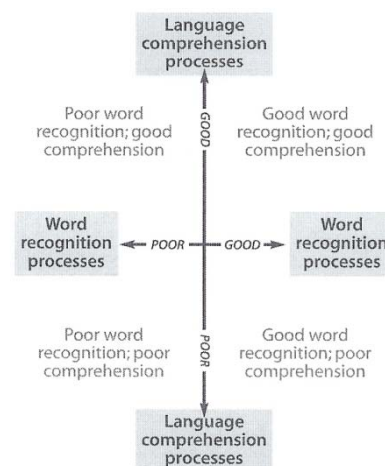
The importance of books

Much of our language comprehension is also enriched greatly by literature – being steeped in books of all descriptions, shared with others, looked-at or read alone, hearing stories read aloud and talking about the characters and their adventures, exploring information books and absorbing written and spoken language through computers and electronic games and activities. Our *vocabulary* (stock of words) is significantly increased through literature. So, as much experience as possible of talking and books is extremely important to get the most value out of reading and to enable the expression of ideas and communication in writing activities.

The Simple View of Reading

(original concept Gough and Tunmer 1986)

In 2006, the **Simple View of Reading model** was officially adopted by the UK government as a very helpful way to illustrate that ‘reading’ consists of two main elements – being able to decode the words on the page (*word recognition processes*) and having the ability to understand the words that are recognised (*language comprehension processes*). Both processes are required to be a ‘reader’ in the fullest sense.



A great deal of time and effort goes into the acquisition of reading and writing – of teachers, of parents and of the learners themselves. These are exciting times, however, as we unpick the complex alphabetic code and understand it better than ever before. There are also so many wonderful books which ideally should be available from the earliest age in the home, in libraries and at school. And, of course, nothing is more essential than **talk, talk, and more talk** to develop language comprehension fully so that ‘readers’ can gain the maximum enjoyment.