

Phonics: The Most Misunderstood Approach to Teaching Reading

A Presentation for the Link 2008 Conference by Don McCabe

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Phonics, n. a way of teaching reading and spelling that stresses symbol-sound relationships, used especially in beginning instruction¹.

Types of Phonics

analytic phonics: a whole-to-part approach to word study in which the student is first taught a number of sight words and then relevant phonic generalizations, which are subsequently applied to other words; deductive phonics. See also whole-word phonics. *Cp.* synthetic phonics.

cluster phonics: a phonics instructional approach that emphasizes the identification of phonograms, as ate in mate. *Cp.* letter phonics; whole-word phonics.

deductive A teaching-learning method in which a generalization or rule is first considered and then applied to specific examples. *Cp.* inductive method.

explicit phonics: memory used to reorganize or recall presented materials.

extrinsic phonics: phonics taught as a supplemental learning aid rather than as an integral part of the program of reading instruction, often in separate workbooks during special time periods. *Cp.* intrinsic phonics.

implicit phonics: “without awareness; specifically, that which “occurs when information that was encoded during a particular episode is subsequently expressed without conscious or deliberate recollection”

inductive phonics: a teaching-learning method in which specific examples are first examined to identify a common characteristic and then used to develop a generalization or rule. Note: a phonics approach that gives many examples of a phonic pattern before arriving at the phonic generalization is an inductive method. *Cp.* deductive method.

intrinsic phonics: phonics instruction and materials that form an integral part of a reading instruction program. *Cp.* extrinsic phonics.

letter phonics: a synthetic phonics approach that emphasizes initially the identification of sounds represented by individual letters. *Cp.* cluster phonics; whole-word phonics.

synthetic phonics: a part-to-whole phonics approach to reading instruction in which the student learns the sounds represented by letters and letter combinations, blends these sounds to pronounce words, and finally identifies which phonic generalizations apply; inductive phonics. *Cp.* analytic phonics; whole-word phonics.

whole-word phonics: an analytic approach to reading instruction in which the sounds represented by certain letters and groups of letters within whole words are compared and contrasted to those in other whole words, avoiding the separate sounding of word parts. *Cp.* analytic phonics, cluster phonics, letter phonics, synthetic phonics.

¹ From: The *Literacy Dictionary, The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing*, T. L. Harris, R.E. Hodges, Editors. International Reading Association, 1995.

Phonemics n. 1. The pattern of relations among phonemes and between phonemes and their allophones.

Phonetics: the study of speech sound, generally conducted within one of three branches of investigation: acoustic phonetics, articulatory phonetics, and auditory phonetics. See also phonology.

acoustic phonetics: the study of the physical structure of speech sound, as vibration, resonance, intensity, etc. *Cp.* articulatory phonetics; auditory phonetics; phonetics.

articulatory phonetics: the study and classification of speech sounds based on their method of production by the vocal organs. *Cp.* acoustic phonetics; auditory phonetics; phonetics.

auditory phonetics: the study of the perceptual responses of listeners as mediated by the hearing organs. See also acoustic phonetics; articulatory phonetics; phonetics.

Phonology: 1. The study of speech sounds and their functions in a language or languages. 2. The relation of the surface structure of a sentence to its actual physical representation. See also generative phonology.

sandhi n. 1. a modification of a sound in a morpheme, as *gimme* for *give me*. Note: The term comes from a Sanskrit word meaning joining or juncture. 2. a phonological modification occurring especially at a word boundary. *Cp.* assimilation (def.5); dissimilation.

A Sampling of the “Rules” that Often Hinder Rather than Help Beginning Readers

1. There are 5 vowels: A, E, I, O, and U.

Linguists say that there are between 13 and 18 vowels in English.

The dictionary linguistic definition of a vowel is: “A speech sound created by the relatively free passage of breath through the larynx and oral cavity, usually forming the most prominent and central sound of a syllable”

Isn't that what a “grunt” is?

The linguists define Consonants as: “a speech sound produced by a partial or complete obstruction of the air stream by any of various constrictions of the speech organs”

That simply means shapers of the grunt. Either before or after. as in: “AY”
Bay, Ail, Bail.

2. The letter A has two sounds: A as in Apple and “AY” as in Ape.

Aye, Mama and Papa walked to the spa.

3. When two vowels go walking the first one does the talking.

Caesar plaid aisle taut aunt Tao break sweat dew Einstein belief savior shoe moo
out boudoir colour boil ought suave suite suede

4. Long vowels say their names. The long vowels are: AY, EE, AH'ee, OH, OO, AW, AH, and OY. “Y-OO” has the consonant Y in front of the OO just as in the word **you**.

Luke, fruit, boo, Lou, true.

5. In words that end VCe the vowel is long.

Notice the **ice** and **ace** and **age** that is in **service**, **palace**, and **garage**.

6. In English the letters are sounded out left to right. Spanish, *si*; Russian, *dah*. English and French, no and *non*.

Demons **demonstrate** **demonstratively**. **Ma** & **Mag** read about the **Magi** and their **magic magicians**.

A Rule to Remember: Never say, “Sound it out.”

A Sampling of the “Rules” That Often Help Rather than Hinder Beginning Readers

1. Words that cannot be reduced to a base of one meaningful syllable have different phonic patterns than those that have a one syllable base. For example, the words picking and nicking can be reduced to a meaningful base of pick and nick respectively. However, the word picnic cannot. Hence, no letter k! The word fisherman can be reduced to fish but official cannot! Bridge message not brage messidge.
2. The letters A,E,I,O,U have no sound of their own. Their sounds depend upon their neighbors. A, all, ma, bag, bake. The spelling of the schwa sound can often be deduced; e.g., democrat & democracy; theologian & theology; reside, resident, residential; company, companion, drama, dramatic; specify, specific.
3. The phonics at ends of words are often different than the phonics at the beginnings of words. For example, the letters try are pronounced “tree” at the ends of words such as pantry, sentry, country, etc. The letter A? about, accurate vs. Shea, Ma, mama.
4. The consonant “y” is often invisible as in union, Europe, beautiful, and cute.
5. The letters I and Y are mischievous identical twins switching identities as in physics, psycho, savior and onion.
6. Never drop a y! Change it to an I as in party/parties but leave it there when adding –ing as in studying. Drop the e in die and lie but change the I to Y for dying and lying.
7. The letters U and W are also mischievous identical twins as in swayed and suede, paw and Paul.
8. Use I before E except after C or when sounded as I or A as in Einstein and weigh. Neither, weird, foreign, leisure, seize, forfeit, and height are the common exceptions spelled right, but don’t let the CIEN words get you uptight.

Things Good Readers Know

1. That the letters **resh** in a word are pronounced RESH as in fresh, and refreshments and that the letters **ish** in a word are pronounced ISH as in fish and fishermen
2. That the letters **an** at the end of a single syllable word are pronounced AN as in tan and Jan.
3. That the letter **y** and the letters **ies** at the end of a single syllable word are pronounced “eye” and “eyes” as in try and fries.

Things Good Readers Know but Don't Know that they Know.

1. They immediately recognize that the letters **missi** in a polysyllabic word are pronounced _____ as in _____ and _____
the letters **fici** in a polysyllabic word are pronounced _____ as in _____ and _____
the letters **titi** in a polysyllabic word are pronounced _____ as in _____ and _____
- 2 That the letters **an** at the end of a polysyllabic word are pronounced _____ as in _____ and _____
3. That the letters **try** at the end of a polysyllabic word are pronounced _____ as in _____ and _____

Things Good Readers Don't Know but Don't Know that they Don't Know.

1. victuals rhymes with (a) hick jewels, (b)skittles, (c) Nick tools, Brick too Al's
2. lough rhymes with (a) cough, (b) tough, (c) bough, (d) though, (e) through, (f) lock
3. tsk, tsk; tut, tut; ahem; uh, uh; whew are words they use but never thought about ever spelling them.

What is the AVKO Educational Research Foundation?

AVKO is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to helping solve the problem of how to teach the reading and spelling of the English language so that all our children may become literate adults.

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(See www.avko.org for most current pricing)

How to contact Don McCabe

e-mail: info@avko.org

Phone: Toll Free 1-866-285-6612

For more information about how the AVKO Educational Research Foundation can help you help your children become better readers and spellers, visit www.avko.org