

Explicit Systematic Phonics

The purpose of phonics instruction is to teach children sound-spelling relationships and how to use those relationships to read words. Phonics instruction should be explicit and systematic. It is explicit in that sound-spelling relationships are directly taught. Students are told, for example, that the letter *s* stands for the /s/ sound. It is systematic in that it follows a scope and sequence that allows children to form and read words early on. The skills taught are constantly reviewed and applied to real reading.

Systematic and early instruction in phonics leads to better reading. This is because phonics knowledge aids in the development of word recognition. Word recognition, in turn, increases fluency. Reading fluency, then, improves reading comprehension since children are not struggling with decoding and are able to devote their full attention to making meaning from text. Inadequate decoding is characteristic of poor readers.

Good phonics lessons contain the following critical parts. Each will be discussed in depth on the following pages.

- Phonological Awareness
- Introduce Sound-Spelling
- Phonics Maintenance
- Blending
- Word Building
- Dictation/Spelling

Phonological Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding or insight that a word is made up of a series of discrete sounds (phonemes). This awareness includes the ability to pick out and manipulate sounds in spoken words. **Phonological awareness** is an “umbrella” term that includes phonemic awareness, or awareness of words at the phoneme (sound) level. It also includes an awareness of word units larger than the phoneme. Therefore, phonological awareness includes:

- words within sentences;
- rhyming units within words;

- beginning and ending sounds within words;
- syllables within words;
- phonemes, or sounds, within words (phonemic awareness); and
- features of individual phonemes such as how the mouth, tongue, vocal cords, and teeth are used to produce the sound.

Children sometime come to school unaware that words consist of sounds. Phonological awareness activities help children learn to distinguish individual sounds, or phonemes, within words. This awareness is a prerequisite skill before children can learn to associate sounds with letters and manipulate sounds to blend words (during reading) or segment words (during spelling). Often children who have difficulties with phonics instruction do so because they have not developed the prerequisite phonological awareness skills that many children gain through years of exposure to rhymes, songs, and being read to. Phonological awareness training provides the foundation on which phonics instruction is built. Thus, children need solid phonological awareness training in order for phonics instruction to be effective. For example, phonics instruction that begins by asking a child what sound the words *sit*, *sand*, and *sock* have in common will not make sense to a child who has difficulty discriminating sounds in words, cannot segment sounds within words, or does not understand what is meant by the term *sound*. Children must be able to auditorily discriminate /s/ in the words *sit*, *sand*, and *sock* before it makes sense to them that the letter *s* stands for this sound in these words.

Most phonological awareness activities are oral. They are playful in nature and provide an engaging way for children to discriminate the sounds that make up words. For example, oral blending activities help children to hear how sounds are put together to make words. These activities will lead to decoding, in which children begin sounding out or blending words independently. Children who have difficulty orally blending words will have difficulty sounding out words while reading. The oral blending exercises begin with blending larger word parts, such as syllables, and progress to blending onsets and rimes and finally whole words sound by sound. The earliest oral blending exercises use words that begin with continuous consonants such as *s*, *m*, *l*, *f*, *r*, and *z*. These consonant sounds can be sustained without distortion. This makes it easier for children to hear the distinct sounds and more efficient to model the principle of oral blending,

because all the sounds in the words can be “sung” together in a more natural manner. For example, the word *sat* can be stretched out and sung like this: *sssaaat*. Movements can also be added to help children note when the speaker goes from one sound to the next. Many children will benefit from these visual cues.

The oral segmentation exercises help children to separate words into sounds. These exercises begin with a focus on syllables, which are easier to distinguish than individual sounds. Segmentation exercises will lead to spelling, in which children begin segmenting words into their component sounds in order to write them. Children who have difficulty orally segmenting words will have difficulty breaking apart words in order to spell them. You can tell if children are developing the necessary segmentation skills when they begin asking questions such as “What stands for the /a/ sound in *cat*?” or “What stands for the /sh/ sound in *shop*?”

Oral blending and oral segmentation tasks are the primary tasks focused on because of their connection to early reading and writing development. In addition to these tasks, discrimination activities will help children to focus on specific sounds in words. For example, children are asked to listen for vowel sounds. Since vowel sounds are necessary for decoding, and children’s early invented spellings often omit vowels, much practice is provided to help children hear these sounds in words. It is easier for children to discriminate long-vowel sounds than short-vowel sounds. Therefore, the exercises contain long- before short-vowel sound discrimination. Additionally, children practice listening for specific consonants at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of words.

Phonological awareness is not the same thing as phonics. Phonological awareness deals with sounds in spoken words, whereas phonics involves the relationship between sounds and written symbols. Therefore, phonics deals with learning sound-spelling relationships and is associated with print. Most phonological awareness tasks, by contrast, are purely oral.

According to Adams (1990), there are **five basic types of phonological awareness tasks**. Within each task type are progressively more complex activities. These task types and sample activities include the following.

• **Task 1—The ability to hear rhymes and alliteration**

a. rhyme

Example: I once saw a cat, sitting next to a dog. I once saw a bat, sitting next to a frog.

b. alliteration

Example: Six snakes sell sodas and snacks.

c. assonance

Example: The leaf, the bean, the peach—all were within reach.

• **Task 2—The ability to do oddity tasks**

a. rhyme

Example: Which word does not rhyme: *cat, sat, pig?* (pig)

b. beginning consonants

Example: Which two words begin with the same sound: *man, sat, sick?* (sat, sick)

c. ending consonants

Example: Which two words end with the same sound: *man, sat, ten?* (man, ten)

d. medial sounds (long vowels)

Example: Which word does not have the same middle sound: *take, late, feet?* (feet)

e. medial sounds (short vowels)

Example: Which two words have the same middle sound: *top, cat, pan?* (can, pan)

f. medial sounds (consonants)

Example: Which two words have the same middle sound: *kitten, missing, lesson?* (missing, lesson)

• **Task 3—The ability to orally blend words**

a. syllables

Example: Listen to these word parts. Say the word as a whole. ta . . . ble—What's the word? (table)

b. onset/rime

Example: Listen to these word parts. Say the word as a whole. /p/ . . . an—What's the word? (pan)

c. phoneme by phoneme

Example: Listen to these word parts. Say the word as a whole.
/s/ /a/ /t/—What's the word? (sat)

• **Task 4—The ability to orally segment words (including counting sounds)**

a. syllables

Example: Listen to this word: *table*. Say it syllable by syllable.
(ta . . . ble)

b. onset/rime

Example: Listen to this word: *pan*. Say the first sound in the word (the onset) and then the rest of the word (the rime).
(/p/ . . . an)

c. phoneme by phoneme (counting sounds)

Example: Listen to this word: *sat*. Say the word sound by sound.
(/s/ /a/ /t/) How many sounds do you hear? (3)

• **Task 5—The ability to do phonemic manipulation tasks**

a. initial sound substitution

Example: Replace the first sound in *mat* with /s/. (sat)

b. final sound substitution

Example: Replace the last sound in *mat* with /p/. (map)

c. vowel substitution

Example: Replace the middle sound in *map* with /o/. (mop)

d. syllable deletion

Example: Say *baker* without the *ba*. (ker)

e. initial sound deletion

Example: Say *sun* without the /s/. (un)

f. final sound deletion

Example: Say *hit* without the /t/. (hi)

g. initial phoneme in a blend deletion

Example: Say *step* without the /s/. (tep)

h. final phoneme in a blend deletion

Example: Say *best* without the /t/. (bes)

i. second phoneme in a blend deletion

Example: Say *frog* without the /r/. (fog)

TIPS

- Move through the activities quickly. You need not spend a lot of instructional time on these activities. They are designed to be quick-paced and playful.
- Carefully pronounce all the sounds. Avoid distorting sounds. For example, avoid adding an “uh” to a sound, such as saying “suh” instead of /sssss/.
- Do not expect mastery of all skills. Some children will need many opportunities with various phonological awareness tasks to become successful. Hints throughout the lessons provide ideas for modifying tasks to help children experiencing difficulties. In addition, phonological awareness intervention activities are provided at the end of each lesson. Informally monitor students and select those who need this intervention. Conduct the activities during Differentiated Instruction/Independent Center time.

Introduce Sound-Spelling

Introducing a Sound-Spelling Follow these steps when introducing a new sound-spelling:

- Write the spelling on the chalkboard or point to the alphabet frieze card containing the new sound-spelling.
- State the sound-spelling correspondence as you point to the spelling and key word (or picture) on the card. For example, say “The letter s stands for /s/ as in *sock*.”
- Write the key word (the pictured word on the card) on the chalkboard and circle the spelling. For example, write the word *sock* on the chalkboard and circle the letter s.
- Point to the spelling and have children state the sound it stands for. It is important that all children participate in all aspects of the lesson. Therefore, group choral responses, rather than calling on volunteers, is ideal.
- Write the spelling on an index card and add that card to a growing deck of cards you will use for phonics review during the Phonics Maintenance portion of the lesson.
- For children needing additional support, use the following Teach-Coach-Assess-Reteach Model during Differentiated Instruction/Independent Center time.

Teach: Write a lowercase s on a card with an arrow underneath. Then place the letter card in the pocket chart. Say, “Here’s how we spell the sound we just heard. My turn.” Point to the tail of the arrow. Pause. Then move a finger under the letter and say its sound—/sssss/. Since s is a continuous sound, hold your finger under the letter and say its sound for two seconds and then slash to the right. Say, “I’ll say it again.” Repeat the same sequence (point, pause, move finger and hold under the letter, then move off to the right).

Coach: Say, “Together.” Point to the tail. Pause. Say, “Sound.” Then quickly move your finger under the letter and hold for two seconds. Then slash right. Move your finger back to the tail. Pause. Say, “Again.” Move your finger and hold, etc.

Assess: Say, “Your turn.” Point to tail. Pause. Say, “Sound.” Then move your finger under letter and hold if continuous. Then slash right. Move your finger back to the tail. Pause. Say, “Again.” Mover finger, etc.

Reteach: If students have difficulty, repeat the instructional sequence (model, coach, assess).

Phonics Maintenance

It is important that children actually overlearn the sound-spelling relationships. Therefore, phonics maintenance is a critical part of each phonics lesson. After each sound-spelling is introduced, and the spelling is written on an index card, use the index card deck to review all the sound-spellings.

- Display one card at a time. Have children chorally state the sound that the spelling stands for. For example, when you show the s card, children will chorally say /s/. For spellings children struggle with, place the index card at the bottom of the deck, and review it again.
- When completed, state the sound for the spelling on each card. Have the class chorally state the letter or letters that stand for the sound. Then show the card for children to check their response. For example, when you say the /s/ sound, children will chorally say “s.”
- You may wish to repeat this procedure at the beginning and end of each day’s lesson to provide additional review. It is critical that this be a daily routine.

TIPS

- Mix and vary the order of the sound-spellings reviewed from lesson to lesson.
- Use some sort of signal so students respond in unison. For example, point to the left side of a spelling, pause for about a second (to give students thinking time), say “Sound,” then quickly move your finger under the spelling. If necessary, repeat by saying “Again” and then move your finger under the spelling as before. (Please note that you are not saying the sounds with the students but rather listening to them to see if they know them.) Correct any mistakes.
- After going through the entire set of index cards, always review those sound-spellings that were troublesome.

Blending Words

Purpose The purpose of blending is to teach children a strategy for using their knowledge of sound-spellings to read words. At the beginning of the program, children will be blending words sound by sound. As they get more reading practice and repeated exposures to words, many words will become sight words

and sound by sound blending will be unnecessary. However, it is critical that you model for children how to blend words daily and you help children work through every decodable word in the stories they read. Blending is constantly modeled to show children how to figure out, or read, unfamiliar words.

There are two blending procedures which have the greatest reading “pay-off”—**final blending** and **successive blending**. In final blending, the sound of each spelling is stated and stored. The whole word isn’t blended until all the sounds in the word have been identified and pronounced. An example of this procedure using the word *sat* follows:

1. Point to the letter *s* and say /s/.
2. Point to the letter *a* and say /a/.
3. Slowly slide your finger under the letters *sa* and say /sa/ slowly.
4. Then, quickly slide your finger under the letters *sa* and say /sa/ quickly.
5. Next, point to the letter *t* and say /t/.
6. Slowly slide your finger under *sat* and say /sat/ slowly.
7. Circle the word with your finger and say, “The word is *sat*.”

The major advantage of this procedure is that you can determine where a student is having difficulty as he or she attempts to blend an unfamiliar word using this method. For example, if the student does not provide the correct sound for the spelling *s*, you have valuable information for further instruction. In addition, you can determine which students lack the ability to orally string together sounds. For example, if a child correctly identifies /s/ for the letter *s* and /a/ for the letter *a*, but pronounces these two sounds in combination as “suh-aa,” the student is not blending the sounds.

In successive blending, the sound that each spelling stands for is produced in sequence, without pauses. An example of this procedure using the word *sat* follows:

1. Point to the beginning of the word *sat*.
2. Run your finger under each letter as you extend the sound that each letter stands for. For example, you would say *ssssaaaat*. Do not pause between sounds. For example, do not say /s/ (pause) /a/ (pause) /t/. If the first sound is not a continuous consonant sound, quickly blend the first sound with the vowel sound that follows. For example, say *baaaat*.

3. Slowly compress the extended word. Therefore, go from *ssssaaaat* to *ssaat* to *sat*.
4. Circle the word with your finger and say, "The word is *sat*."

Both blending procedures are best introduced in phonics lessons using simple CVC words (*sun, mop, red*). These lessons should be the first lessons children are provided. It is the principle of stringing together sounds that is so critical and that students must master. Therefore, teach and model it in the most efficient manner. Choose the blending method that works best with the majority of your students. You may wish to use the other method during individual and small group sessions (Differentiated Instruction/Independent Center time) with those children struggling with blending. This alternate method may be more effective for these students.

As the year progresses, you want to move children from orally blending words to silently blending them. That is, you want to encourage children to begin to blend words silently or in a whisper before saying the whole word aloud. This is a transitional step that some children need help going through. You may wish to begin this transition in the third unit, after children have had a couple months of blending orally and have learned many sound-spelling relationships. Model for children how to do this and provide them with opportunities to do so.

Blending Lines Formal blending practice begins by using blending lines written on the chalkboard. These blending lines contain sets of words and sentences. They are cumulative in nature, reviewing sounds and words previously taught. For example:

Sat	sad	at
am	Sam	Pam
I am sad.		
I see Sam.		

Use the following blending procedure:

- Write the blending lines on the chalkboard.
- Have children chorally blend the words sound by sound. Run your hand under each letter as they blend the word aloud. Then have children say the word

naturally. Model blending as needed. Continue this procedure for all of the words in each line.

- Blend the sentences by blending one word at a time, sound by sound. Then reread the sentence at a standard pace. As the year progresses, children will need less support blending each word in the word lines; they should begin blending the words independently, with support given only when necessary.
- Review the blending lines until you feel children can blend the words independently. For any high-frequency words in the sentences in the blending lines, simply state the word aloud as a whole unit. These words will be learned by children as sight words long before they can blend them and many contain irregular spelling patterns that make blending confusing or difficult for children.

As an option before working with the blending lines, use the following blending procedure:

- Using letter cards and a pocket chart, build a word for children to blend. In the first few lessons, model for children how to blend the words sound by sound. Point to the first spelling, and have children say the sound. Hold for two seconds if it can be sustained. Then move on to the next spelling and, if possible, hold it. Children should start saying the second sound without a pause or break. In a sense, the sounds are “sung” together. Continue in a similar fashion for the rest of the spellings in the word. Then ask children to identify the word they just blended. For example, for the word *Sam*, you would say “SSSaaamm,” not /s/ (pause) /a/ (pause) /m/. This “connected” form of blending is easier for children who cannot blend segmented (isolated) sounds. For words that start with sounds that cannot be sustained (such as the word *can*), blend the consonant with the vowel as if it were a syllable. In addition, you may wish to draw an arrow under each word to visually illustrate for children the direction in which the sounds are blended.

TIPS

- Do this every day. Note how words change from lesson to lesson. The primary purpose of this activity is NOT to master any one set of words but rather experience success applying sound-spelling strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words.
- Have the words written on the chalkboard in advance. Do not group the words by pattern but rather mix them thoroughly.

- Use some sort of signal so students respond in unison. (Point, pause, then say “Read.”) If students have difficulty with a spelling (or are used to ignoring vowels altogether), consider precueing them by pointing to that spelling in a word and having them say its sound before reading the word itself. Discontinue this prompt as soon as possible.
- Be thoughtful in your correction of errors. For one-to-one relationships, point to the spelling on the index card or alphabet frieze as a reference. Then point back to the spelling in the misread word and say “Sound.” Then point to the beginning of the word and say “Read.” For generalizations (such as final *e*), use a walk-talk correction. (Is there an *e* at the end? So is this vowel going to be long or short? What sound? What words?) For consonant clusters or blends, have students practice saying the sounds as a unit, for example *brrrr* or *cllll*.
- For children struggling, provide additional blending practice during Differentiated Instruction/Independent Center time.
- Discuss the meanings of any words in the blending lines and sentences. Have children use the words in sentences of their own. You may wish to preteach the meanings of the words in the blending lines to students learning English as a second language. Preteach the words during Differentiated Instruction/Independent Center time in the days prior to the lesson.
- Avoid telling the words to students in advance and discourage individual students from calling them out before the group blends the words chorally.

Dictation/Spelling

Just as students practice decoding through blending, they practice encoding through dictation. Dictation initially begins during word-building exercises, in which children are introduced to more and more sounds and spellings and given opportunities to form words using these spellings. Children will quickly begin to see how their control over written language grows as they are capable of writing more and more words. They will also begin to see how reading and writing are related. Just as blending gives them a strategy for figuring out unfamiliar words, dictation gives them a strategy for spelling words. Research shows that children learn letter-sound relationships and spellings as they write. The formal, sequential dictation practice in each lesson provides children with structured opportunities to develop their writing and spelling skills. It will also help you to assess those children who are unable to segment words and need additional phonological awareness practice with segmentation.

The dictation exercises are not meant to be used as formal assessment tools, but rather as guided practice in writing words and checking children's understanding of sound-spelling correspondences. Since many of the words in the dictation lines contain the new sound introduced, children are not expected to have mastered the sound at this time.

Sample Dictation:

sat am at

Sam is sad.

Use the following steps during dictation:

- State aloud the first word in the dictation line, and have children repeat it. For those children who have difficulty hearing the sounds in the words, you can provide two levels of help. One level involves saying the sounds more slowly while moving your hands from right to left while facing the class to illustrate beginning, middle, and end. A second level of assistance involves modeling the blending for each sound in the word. In effect, children are helped to hear and write one sound at a time.
- Then have children write the word. Walk around the room, and give help as necessary. This may include showing children the correct stroke procedure for writing letters or directing them to the correct spelling on the alphabet frieze. In the case of multiple spellings for a single sound (such as *c*, *k*, and *ck*), tell

children which spelling is correct. Continue this procedure for each word in the dictation lines. For the dictation sentence, read the entire sentence aloud and then focus on one word at a time.

- As each word is completed, provide feedback by writing the “answer” on the chalkboard so that children can correct their work. A key component of dictation is self-correction, in which children begin to notice and correct their errors.

Sample Model:

This time I want you to write a word that can be sounded out. The word is *sat*. Say *sat*. The students say *sat*. Sound *sat*. Here you slowly say the sounds in *sat* without any break and again showing beginning, middle, and end with right to left hand motions. Then move your hand back to the beginning position and ask “What’s the beginning sound?” The students should say /sssss/. Write /sssss/. Wait for the students to finish. Then ask, “What word are you writing?” *Sat*. The beginning sound was . . . ? “/sssss/” Next sound . . . ? “/aaaa/” Write /aaaa/. Wait for students to finish. What word are you writing? *Sat*. What do you have so far? /sssssaaaa/. Last sound . . . ? ?/t/? Write /t/. When students finish, ask the class to tell you the sounds in *sat* as you write the word on the chalkboard.

Follow the same procedure for all the words. While students are writing, walk around and monitor their work, paying more attention to those who are likely to experience difficulty. (Note: This teacher-assisted sound by sound process is critical for students who cannot segment sounds. Don’t take short cuts by just giving students the word, waiting for them to finish, and then writing the answer on the chalkboard. Some students will wait and copy what is on the chalkboard and will not learn how to become independent.)

For the sentence, say, Now you will write a sentence with three words. The sentence is *Sam is sad*. Repeat it. *Sam is sad*. What is the first word? *Sam*. How do we start a sentence? With a capital letter. Is *Sam* a word we can sound out or a word on the Word Wall? Sound *Sam*. Use hand motions as before. First sound? Students say the first sound. Write it. What word are you writing? What do you have so far? Next sound? The students respond. Write it. Continue in a similar manner until the word is done.

What sentence are you writing? *Sam is sad*. What have you written so far? *Sam*. What is the next word? *Is*. This is a word on the Word Wall. If you know

how to spell is go ahead and write it. If you are not sure, check the Word Wall.
Repeat the above procedures with *sad* treating it as a word that can be
sounded out.