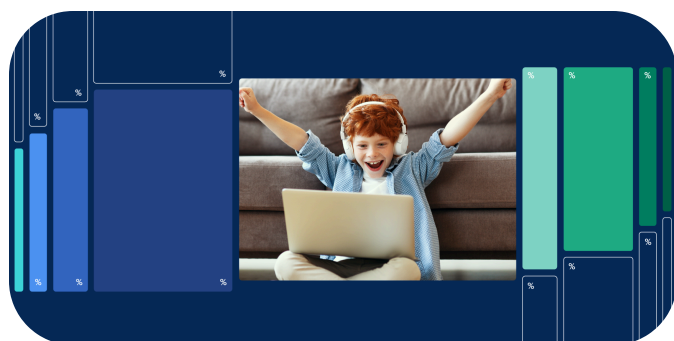


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How to Teach Phonics to Beginning Readers



Phonics is the best, most efficient way to teach children how to read. Yes, plenty of words break the "rules" and don't sound *exactly* the way they look, but phonics is still the strongest way to give children a strong foundational understanding of how to translate the lines and squiggles on the page into the sounds that make up language. And as a teacher, you can make your students' experiences as beginning readers fun and exciting. Learn how to teach phonics to beginning readers with these starting strategies.

What is Phonics?

Jump to a Section

[What is Phonics?](#)[Start with phonemic awareness](#)[How to teach phonics](#)[Make learning phonics fun!](#)[How to teach phonics with SparkReading](#)

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According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, phonics is “a method of teaching people to read by correlating sounds with letters or groups of letters in an alphabetic writing system.”

In other words, when students learn phonics, they learn the sounds associated with lines and squiggles we call letters — and they learn how those letters work together to create even more sounds, all of which together shape the words we use to communicate.

Phonics is a straightforward, methodical way of teaching *decoding*, the first skill that, with comprehension, goes into effective reading. Without solid decoding skills, students can’t make good progress on reading comprehension because they haven’t accurately read the words on the page. Unlike other methods of teaching reading, like the [outdated “whole language” approach](#), phonics doesn’t rely on context clues (which assume possession of a level of decoding and comprehension skills). Rather, phonics treats letters as an actual code for the sounds we often speak.

Due to the English language’s many influences, there are many words that don’t exactly follow the phonics rules. Good phonics lessons, then, will also cover a handful of sight words (like *the*), along with common exceptions to various rules and the variations in sounds that letter combinations like /ea/ can make (*bread/meat/pearl*).

Before students can start matching sounds to letters, however, they must be aware of the sounds themselves.

Start with phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize distinct sounds in spoken language. This comes with good listening skills and translates into reading by helping students match sounds to letters and combinations of sounds to words.

While phonemic awareness begins at home (parents play a crucial role in developing this skill), educators can help strengthen students' phonemic awareness through lessons and activities that emphasize sounds. Reading books that rhyme at storytime, practicing animal sounds, or playing games with more advanced students that task them with rhyming or recalling words with similar sounds.

What word rhymes with dress?

What animals start with a /p/ sound?

Integrating questions and activities like this throughout the school day can help students naturally pick up and distinguish more sounds. Once students have started learning their letters, you can take these activities a step further:

If mess and dress rhyme, what letters might they both have? What about puppy and polar bear and penguin?

How to teach phonics

The best way to teach phonics is in a systematic way that starts simple and adds complexity over time, as students pick up skills. Don't dwell too long on any one step — mastering one level of phonics should immediately lead to the next level so students

can progress in their reading ability before getting bored.

1. Start with simple hard consonants and short vowel sounds.

You'll gradually work through the whole alphabet, but start with a group of letters (often, *S, A, T, P, I, N*) that can be combined to make a variety of words. This way, as students learn the individual letters and sounds, they can see how those letters work together to create words.

2. Introduce blending with simple 3-letter words.

Nap, sit, pat. Once your students have learned a few letters, have them practice “sounding out” simple 3-letter words. These should be words that use the simple hard consonant and short vowel sounds that your students already know.

3. Introduce more complex consonant combinations and bump up to 4-letter words.

Your phonics curriculum will outline exactly which combinations to start with, but once your students have mastered most of the letters' sounds, you'll need to introduce them to letter combinations that change the shape of the sound. For example: *st, gr, lm, ng, sh*. Some of these are more straightforward than others, so start with what can more easily be sounded out — and be sure to show these combinations in real words your students can read!

4. Teach vowel combinations — ea, oo, ai — and put them into action.

Vowel combinations can be more complicated and irregular than consonant combinations, so seeing them in real words is even more important. Exercises that have students identify words with similar vowel sounds can be helpful for ingraining this knowledge (ex: *bear, hair, learn, pear*).

As readers advance, encourage them to write as well as read! Once they know their letters and sounds, they can practice writing their ideas. Even if their spelling isn't correct, this helps them practice applying their knowledge of letter sounds.

Make learning phonics fun!

Reading is fun — and learning to read should be too! There are a whole host of ways you can make learning phonics more fun and interactive. Here are a few of our ideas:

1. Magnetic letters and/or letter blocks.

During playtime or certain breaks throughout the day, have magnetic letters or letter blocks out and encourage your students to take turns spelling out different words they know — or even words they're making up! Nonsense words can be a fun way to practice letter sounds, and who knows? Your students may even find out that they already know how to spell a fun word.

2. Play games like “I Spy” and “Animal Names”.

You can use “I Spy” books or just play the game in your classroom with prompts like “I spy something starting with the /f/ sound.” You can use either sounds or letters for this game, depending on whether you want to focus on phonemic awareness or the letter-sound relationship. For Animal Names, everyone picks an animal that starts with the same letter as their first name (Henry hippo, Amber alligator, Marty mouse); you can also play with other categories like sports or fruits and vegetables.

3. Label the classroom.

You can label the classroom — or you can hand your students sticky notes and ask them to label different objects in the classroom (desks, whiteboard, trash can, etc.). If you do the labeling, the labels can help observant students learn more words and spellings as they come to school each day. If your students do the labeling, they get to practice their spelling and phonetic word creation skills.

Phonics is your students’ first foray into reading for themselves — and how you teach phonics can make the learning process fun and interesting. Hopefully, we’ve sparked your imagination. Now, let’s pass that inspiration to students!

How to teach phonics with SparkReading

Get structured practice and support for phonics instruction with SparkReading's phonics practice and assessments. Brought to

you by Pear Assessment (formerly Edulastic), SparkReading's phonics helps new readers learn sounds, spelling, and build their fundamental mastery of English language basics.

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