

FAQ's

What is phonics?

Phonics is a way of teaching children to read and write which is built upon a framework of 44 sounds, known as '**phonemes**'. These phonemes are matched to written letters or groups of letters — known as '**graphemes**' — which then become the building blocks to form words.

Synthetic phonics is the most widely used method for teaching phonics, and is taught throughout primary schools in England. The principle behind synthetic phonics is to recognise the link between individual phonics letters and sounds. It is this focus on pure sounds over whole words that better allows children to develop the skills for independent reading, for if they can visualise every component sound, then they can assemble or 'synthesise' those sounds to form a word, even if the word itself is unfamiliar. For example, specific knowledge of the grapheme 'igh' would enable the child to quickly recognise multiple words such as 'n-igh-t', 's-igh-t' or 'f-l-igh-t'. The act of putting the sounds together in this manner is known as 'blending'.

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP (Minister For School Standards) states in [The Reading Framework](#) (Department for Education July 2021) "*The evidence for phonics is indisputable, with the EEF(Educational Endowment Fund)onsidering it the most secure area of pedagogy.*"

What is a phoneme?

A unit of sound that can be combined with other units to form a word.

What is a grapheme?

A written letter or combination of letters that represent a phoneme. This can be one to four letters long.

What is a digraph?

A two-letter grapheme that represents one phoneme, for example 'sh', 'ch', 'ee', 'or'.

What is a trigraph?

A three-letter grapheme that represents one phoneme, for example 'igh', 'dge', 'ear'.

What is a quadgraph?

A four-letter grapheme that represents one phoneme, for example 'eigh', 'ough'.

What is a split digraph?

A digraph that is split in half with an extra consonant in the middle, for example 'a-e' (take), 'o-e' (mode), 'i-e' (time).

What are adjacent consonants?

Consonants that appear next to each other in a word but represent different sounds. While some pairs of consonants are digraphs, these are instead two single graphemes. For example, the letters 'g' and 'r' in '**grab**' form two separate sounds, as do the letters 'n' and 'd' in '**hand**'. Adjacent consonants can also appear in threes such as in the word '**string**' where they are aptly known as a 'consonant string'.

What are consonant and vowel digraphs?

A digraph is made up of two letters. These letters can either be two consonants, such as 'ck', two vowels, such as 'oo', or a vowel and a consonant, such as 'ow'.

What is segmenting?

The act of breaking a word down into separate phonemes, sounding them out and identifying the corresponding graphemes, for example: qu-a-ck.

What is 'blending'? (alternatively known as 'synthesising')

The practice of recognising and putting together individual component sounds in order to form a complete word.

What are difficult to read and spell words?

Words that are difficult to segment because some of their phonemes and graphemes do not match each other, for example 'the', 'was', 'said'. As they can't be decoded using the normal phonics method, children need to learn to recognise these on sight.

What are high-frequency words?

The most common words used in our language, many of which are also tricky words. Many teachers believe that a familiarity with these words is the key to unlocking the reading journey.

What is the best way to teach phonics?

Schools in England teach synthetic phonics as specified by National Curriculum guidelines. For the reasons explained above, it is widely thought that systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), using a validated teaching programme, is the most effective way to teach phonics. The new [Reading Framework](#) (DfE July 2021) outlines that *"the effective teaching of reading, as evidenced in these schools, requires not just a systematic synthetic phonics programme but its consistent implementation in every class"*.

What is an SSP teaching programme?

Ofsted specifies that an SSP teaching programme must be rigorous, systematic, used with fidelity (any resources used should exactly match the Grapheme Phoneme Correspondence (GPC) progression of their chosen SSP approach), and achieve strong results for all pupils, including the most disadvantaged. There is emphasis on children being able to keep up rather than catch up so that children at risk of reading failure are given the opportunity for extra practice and support from the beginning. There are now a good range of commercially available SSP programmes which have been validated by the DfE and you can view the list [here](#).

Kind Regards

Phonics and Reading Team