

Debbie Hepplewhite's simple to complex Alphabetic Code overview (adapted for North American accents)

- Slash marks /ai/ denote *units of sound* (phonemes or combined phonemes). *Letters and letter groups* (graphemes) appear in single apostrophes 'ay'.
- References to short vowel sounds relate to the sounds as in 'apple, egg, insect, octopus, umbrella' denoted as: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/ - said in a 'staccato' manner - as opposed to references to the long vowel sounds commonly denoted as: /ai/, /ee/, /igh/, /oa/, /yoo/ as in 'aid, eel, night, oak, barbecue'.

Key to the 12 units of Debbie's online synthetic phonics program, Phonics International:

units 1-5	simple code with some spelling alternatives	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th		
6-12	/air/, /eer/, /zh/, split digraphs, complex code	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th

simple code		complex code					teaching points		
units of sound (phonemes and combined phonemes)	graphemes: spelling variations which ARE CODE FOR the 44+ phonemes and combined phonemes such as /k+s/ and /y+oo/ with example key words								
/s/	s snake	-ss glass	-ce palace	-se house	ce ci cy cents certain city circle bicycle lacy	sc scissors scythe ascend	-st- castle	ps pseudonym	<p>*Short words ending with the /s/ sound with <i>short</i> medial vowel sounds usually end with double letters 'ss' - as in 'glass'.</p> <p>*Sound out double consonant letters 'ss' as one sound only.</p> <p>*Double consonant letters alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound.</p> <p>*Letters e, i or y alert the reader that the preceding letter 'c' will represent the /s/ sound. (This is often described as 'soft c'.)</p>
/a/	a apple	-alf half	-alves calf, calves		Hollow letters as shown on the chart alert the reader to various pronunciations dependent on the words.				<p>*For letter 'a', teach, "Try the <i>short</i> vowel sound /a/ at first; if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel sound /ai/ (for example, in a word such as 'table')."</p>
/t/	t tent	-tt letter	-ed skipped	-bt debt	pt pterodactyl				<p>*Double consonant letters 'tt' alert the reader to sound out the preceding single vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound, as in 'letter'.</p> <p>*Past tense of verbs: 'ed' graphemes code for /t/, /d/ or /u+d/.</p>
/i/	i insect	*-y sunny	-y cymbals	*-ey monkey	*-ie movie	Dashes indicate that the focus letter/s-sound correspondence is unlikely to be at the beginning of the word.			<p>*Letters 'i' and 'y' and the sounds they represent have very close links. Here the letter 'y' acts as a vowel-letter and vowel-sound.</p> <p>* End graphemes 'y', 'ey' and 'ie' sound between /i/ and /ee/.</p>

/p/	p pan	-pp puppet								*Double consonant letters 'pp' alert the reader to sound out the preceding single vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'p <u>u</u> p <u>p</u> et'.
/n/	n net	-nn bonnet	kn knot	gn gnome	-i <u>ne</u> engine					*Double consonant letters 'nn' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'b <u>o</u> nn <u>e</u> t'. *Some people historically refer to 'silent k' or 'silent g'; others prefer to say that 'kn' and 'gn' are code for the /n/ sound.
/k/	k kit	c cat	-ck duck	ch chameleon	qu bouquet	que plaque				*Letter 'c' is code for the /k/ sound when preceding the letters 'a', 'o' and 'u'. * <i>Short</i> words with short vowel sounds usually end with 'ck' and this grapheme never begins the spelling of words.
/e/	e egg	-ea head	-ai said							*When reading short unknown words with single letter 'e', teach, "Try the <i>short</i> vowel sound /e/ at first, if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel sound /ee/" (as in <u>e</u> mu).
/h/	h hat	wh who								*When letter names are taught, point out that the name for the letter 'h' is pronounced "aitch" – not "haitch". Learn the <i>spelling word bank</i> for words with 'wh' as code for /h/.
/r/	r rat	-rr arrow	wr write	rh rhino						*Some people historically refer to 'silent w' or 'silent h'; others simply prefer to say that the graphemes 'wr' and 'rh' are code for the /r/ sound (phoneme).
/m/	m map	-mm hammer	-mb thumb	-mn column	-me welcome					*Double consonant letters 'mm' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'h <u>a</u> mm <u>e</u> r'. *Some people historically refer to 'silent b' or silent 'n'; others simply prefer to say that 'mb' and 'mn' are code for /m/.
/d/	d dig	-dd puddle	-ed rained							*Double consonant letters 'dd' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'p <u>u</u> dd <u>l</u> e'. *Past tense of verbs: 'ed' graphemes code for /t/, /d/ or /u+d/.
/g/	g girl	-gg juggle	gu guitar	gh ghost	-g <u>ue</u> vogue					*Double consonant letters 'gg' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'j <u>u</u> gg <u>l</u> e'. *Letter 'u' in 'g <u>u</u> ' acts as a block between the letters 'g' and 'e', 'i' or 'y' indicating the 'g' is code for /g/, not /j/ (g <u>u</u> itar).

/o/	o octopus	wa watch	qua qualify	alt salt						<p>*For letter 'o', teach, "Try the <i>short</i> vowel sound /o/ at first; if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel sound /oa/".</p> <p>*Alert the reader that the graphemes 'w' or 'qu' preceding a single letter 'a' can indicate that 'a' is code for the /o/ sound.</p>
/u/	u umbrella	o son	-ou touch							<p>*For 'u', teach, "Try the <i>short</i> vowel sound /u/ at first; if that does not sound right then try the <i>long</i> vowel sound /yoo/".</p> <p>*The letter 'u' is sometimes code for a long /oo/ sound: e.g. flu, judo, truth, Ruth, Pluto.</p>
/l/	l ladder	-ll shell								<p>*To make the /l/ sound, roll up your tongue and say "ul".</p> <p>*Short words with <i>short</i> vowels usually end with 'll' as in bell.</p> <p>*Double consonant letters 'll' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its <i>short</i> sound except '-all' (/or+l/).</p>
/schwa + l/ /ul/		-le kettle	-il pencil	-al hospital	-el camel					<p>*Teach the 'schwa' effect involving /l/ through words such as: little, table, pupil, cymbal, label (pronounced close to "ul").</p> <p>Teach that literal sounding out when reading, however, helps with remembering the spelling: e.g. h-o-s-p-i-t-a-l.</p>
/f/	f feather	-ff cliff	ph photo	-gh laugh						<p>*Double consonant letters 'ff' alert the reader to sound out the preceding single vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'cliff'.</p> <p>*Short words with <i>short</i> vowel sounds usually end with 'ff' as in off and cliff.</p>
/b/	b bat	-bb rabbit	bu building							<p>*Double consonant letters 'bb' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'rabbit'.</p> <p>*When a grapheme is rare like 'bu', learn the <i>word bank</i>.</p>
/j/	j jug	-ge cabbage	ge gi gy gerbil giraffe gymnast	-dge fridge						<p>*Letters e, i or y alert the reader that the preceding letter 'g' might represent the /j/ sound. This is often referred to as 'soft g'. Other words have 'hard g' such as 'get', 'girl' and 'foggy'.</p> <p>*Words <i>ending</i> with the /j/ sound are spelt with 'ge' or 'dge' ('dge' follows single letter, short vowel sounds like 'fridge').</p>
/y/	y yawn									<p>*Teach early on that the letter 'y' is the written code for 4 sounds as in 'yes, my mummy' and 'cymbal'.</p> <p>It is often interchangeable with the vowel sounds /i/, /ee/, /i-ee/ and /igh/; and the graphemes 'i' or 'ie' (berry, berries).</p>

/ai/	ai aid	-ay tray	a table	-ae sundae	a-e cakes	-ey prey	eigh eight	-ea break	*The digraph 'ai' is never used at the end of an English word. *Grapheme 'ea' as code for the /ai/ sound is rare. Note the three common root words: break, steak, great.
/w/	w web	wh wheel	u penguin						*Letter 'w' preceding 'a', 'ar' and 'or' should alert the reader to different possible pronunciations; (w)a - wasp, wag; (w)ar - warm, wary; (w)or - work, worn. Note: what
/oa/	oa oak	ow bow	o yo-yo	-oe oboe	o-e rope	ough dough	eau plateau		*The 'o-i' as in 'poking' alerts the reader to pronounce /oa/.
/igh/	-igh night	-ie tie	i behind	-y shy	i-e bike	ei eider duck			*The 'i-i' as in 'liking' alerts the reader to pronounce /igh/.
/ee/	ee eel	ea eat	e emu	* -y sunny	e-e concrete	-ey key *monkey	-ie chief *movie	-ine sardines	*The 'e-i' as in 'competing' alerts the reader to pronounce /ee/. *The 'y' in 'sunny' is between the sound /i/ and /ee/. Similarly, so is 'ey' in 'monkey' and 'ie' in 'movie'. [Also in /i/ row.]
/or/	or fork	oar oars	-oor door	ore snore	-our four		war warm	quar quarter	*Letter 'w' preceding grapheme 'ar' alerts the reader to say the sound /or/: (w)ar - war, warn, wart, warder. *Sound /w/ as in 'qu' [/k+/w/] also alerts reader to pronounce 'ar' as /or/: (qu)ar - quart, quarter, quartz, quartile.
or /aw/ dependent on accents		aw dawn	au sauce	-al chalk	augh caught	ough thought			*Double consonant letters 'zz' alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel letter with its <i>short</i> sound as in 'jazz'. *Short words with <i>short</i> vowel sounds end with 'zz' - jazz.
/z/	z zebra	-zz jazz	-s fries	-se cheese	-ze breeze	x xylophone			*The grapheme 'ng' can be pronounced differently according to regional accent and dependent upon the particular word. *In some words, the 'n' and 'g' are pronounced separately
/ng/	-n gong	-n jungle		/ngk/ ink	-nk uncle	-nc uncle			*Teach 'nk' as if it was one unit of sound at first for reading and spelling purposes even though it is really two; that is: /ng+k/. This combined 'sound' may be denoted as /ngk/ .

/v/	v violin	-ve dove								*Teach that words ending with the /v/ sound end with the grapheme 've'.
short /oo/	oo book	-oul should	-u push		long /oo/	eu pneumatic drill			*Teach the two sounds represented by the grapheme 'oo' at the same time; short /oo/, long /oo/. *Progress to linking the /oo/ as in 'moon' with the spelling and pronunciation variations of 'ew', 'ue' and 'u-e' [which may represent both the long /oo/ sound and the /yoo/ sound in different words in different accents].	
long /oo/	oo moon	-ue blue	u-e flute	-ew crew	-ui fruit	-ou soup	-o move	ough through		
/k+s/	-x fox	-ks books	-cks ducks	-kes cakes		/g+z/	-x exam	-ggs eggs	*Teach the letter 'x' as if it was one unit of sound /ks/ whereas it is really two sounds /k/+s/. Provide word lists of '-x' words and '-ks', 'cks', '-kes' plural words to compare: e.g. fox, boxes, looks, beaks, ducks, likes.	
/ch/	ch chairs	-tch patch				/cher/		-ture picture	*Grapheme 'tch' indicates a preceding <i>short</i> vowel sound; e.g. ditch, fetch, thatch, notch, hutch, watch. *Grapheme 'ch' follows <i>long</i> vowel sounds (bleach, pooch, reaches); but also some common words with <i>short</i> vowels which need to be noted: rich, which, such, much, touch. *Grapheme 'ch' follows consonants; e.g. mulch, wrench, pinch.	
/sh/	sh sheep	ch chef	-ti station	-ci magician	-ssi mission				*Draw attention to 'ti', 'ci', 'ssi' graphemes in long words. *Provide words in groups with the same 'chunk' endings: -tion, -cian, -cial, -ssion, -cious to become familiar with the words. **Progress to the phoneme /zh/ as in 'television'.	
unvoiced /th/	th thistle								*Teach unvoiced /th/ and voiced /th/ together. *Compare the sounds /f/ and /v/ and study mouth movements of these sounds carefully. In England, pronouncing /th/, /f/ and /v/ frequently causes confusion because of their similarities and the influence of regional accents.	
voiced /th/	th there									

/k+w/	qu queen																			*In English, the letter 'q' is always followed by the letter 'u' and together they are code for two sounds /k/+w/. Treat as one sound unit /kw/ for both reading and spelling purposes when teaching in the early stages. ['qu' is also code for /k/]
/ou/	ou ouch	ow owl	ough plough																	*The <i>grapheme</i> 'ou' as code for the sound /ou/ is never found at the end of an English word. *'ough' is a rare grapheme for an /ou/ sound: bough, plough .
/oi/	oi ointment	oy toy																		*The <i>grapheme</i> 'oi' is never used at the end of English words.
/y+oo/	-ue statue	u unicorn																		*Point out that the graphemes 'ue' and 'u' are also spellings for the long /oo/ sound as in 'blue' and 'super'. *The 'u-i' as in 'amusing' alerts the reader to pronounce /yoo/.
/er/	er mermaid	ir birthday	ur nurse	ear earth	wor world	Canada:	-our humour	-re theatre												*Letter 'w' preceding 'or' alerts the reader to say "wer..." as in: worm, work, worth (sometimes /or/ as in 'worn' and 'sworn'). *Note the difference in USA and Canadian spelling of end /er/.
/ar/	ar artist					USA:	-or humor	-er theater												*Mention early on that American spelling is sometimes different from 'English' spelling and 'Canadian' spelling.
/air/	air hair	-are hare	-ear bear	-ere where																*Teach the /air/ and /eer/ sounds together (see below) as there are so many similar or identical graphemes as code for the /air/ and /eer/ sounds. Teach the word 'their' as 'their things'.
/eer/	eer deer	ear ears	-ere adhere	-ier cashier																*See /air/ above. Provide plenty of experience of the <i>spelling word banks</i> of the /air/ and /eer/ letter/s-sound correspondences.
/zh/	-si television	-s treasure	-z azure	g genre	-ge collage	note: *-y, *-ey, *-ie are pronounced between /i/ and /ee/ when these graphemes are word-endings so they appear in both /i/ and /ee/ rows.														**Progress to this sound from lessons in the /sh/ sound and its spelling variations through 'incidental' teaching. There are no words with the grapheme 'zh' and the letters zh are used to denote the <i>phoneme</i> (sound) only.

The complexities of the English Alphabetic Code include: (adapted for North American accents)

1. one sound (phoneme) can be represented by one, two, three or four letters: e.g. /k/ **k**, /sh/ **sh**, /ch/ **tch**, /ai/ **eigh**
2. one sound can be represented by different spellings (graphemes): e.g. /oa/ is represented by: **o**, **oa**, **ow**, **oe**, **o-e**, **eau**, **ough**
3. one spelling (grapheme) can represent multiple sounds: e.g. 'ough': /oa/ **though**, /aw/ **thought**, long /oo/ **through**, /ou/ **plough**

These complexities are taught explicitly as the Alphabetic Code is taught systematically with Debbie's online *Phonics International* program:

General advice for teaching the Alphabetic Code:

- Choose an **order of introduction** of letter/s-sound correspondences to create a version of a **simple code**. (See left-hand column for Debbie's version). Teach around 2 - 4 correspondences per week. Provide a **cumulative word bank** (for the simple code) for modelling **blending** all-through-the-word for reading, and **segmenting** all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling. The 'simple code', in effect, is part of the complex English code but it is just a 'first step' of introducing the complexities of the English writing system for reading and spelling based on the 44+ phonemes (smallest identifiable sounds of speech).
- Keep the simple code revised and begin to introduce **spelling and pronunciation variations** of the complex code at a rate appropriate to the age and stage of the learner. With effective direct teaching, the rate of learning can be surprisingly fast-paced but use professional judgement as to the pace.
- The Alphabetic Code is not an 'exact science' and **accents need to be taken into account** at all times along with the notion of 'tweaking pronunciations' when *decoding* to reach the regional, national or preferred pronunciation of the target word. Explain the concept of 'accents' to the learners.
- Tweaking, or modifying, pronunciations also helps to **raise awareness of the 'schwa effect'** (unstressed syllables) whereby in reality a sound close to /u/ is the spoken translation of the written code in words such as 'sofa' ("sofu"), 'little' ("littlu"), 'around' ("uround"). The reverse of this is the need to be aware of the spelling possibilities when segmenting spoken words for writing - particularly with regard to the schwa effect. The ability to spell accurately relies on a growing knowledge of **word associations** (that is, **spelling word banks** - noting words with the same letter/s-sound correspondences) and this knowledge takes much longer to acquire than learning to decode well for reading. Always emphasise the **relationship between sounds and graphemes** when teaching spelling *rather than* relying on visual memory of **letter order**. Letter *names* are **used only to relay** an accurate spelling from one person to another and this is *not the actual spelling skill* of most literate adults. Even adults spell with a *sound-to-print* process (identifying the sounds all-through-the-spoken-word) followed by choosing correct graphemes from beginning to end for the specific word. Tell learners explicitly that phonics for reading and for spelling/writing are **adult skills**, especially for new, longer and more difficult words. *Phonics is for adults* and not just for teaching beginners or infants!