Essential Phonics

A simple, multi-sensory programme for teachers and parents to teach reading.

by Mona McNee
Essential Phonics

This is a simple programme to teach children the letters and how they work. It teaches reading, writing and spelling at the same time, at the very beginning. This programme is suitable for any age, initial or remedial teaching.

When are they ready to start?

Most children are ready for this by their 4th birthday if not earlier. They are ready when they can talk and when they can identify letter shapes. (For convenience, the pronoun SHE is used for the teacher/parent, and HE for the learner.) Make an alphabet card, large letters ¾" or 2 cm high, with one letter on each small card. On another card 5" x 6" write 9 (3 rows of 3 letter), or 12 (3 x 4), large. Give the child one of the letters on a small card and see if he can match it. Can he pick it out of the 9 he can see? If he can, he is ready to start learning letters and sounds.

Letters and sounds

Teach that each letter has a sound, that letters are wonderful way of putting sounds on paper. Mention briefly that there are capitals used for the first letter of names. Use dot to dot, and explain what dot, dash, arrow, letter, sound, and word mean.

Start with the word cat as the framework for learning 3 letter/sounds and right-left direction. Explain that you start at the black dot, and go the way the arrow points, along the dots, and there-and-back over the dashes. The aim is to produce straight lines and smooth curves, so you do not go too slowly from dot to dot but fairly fast, only taking care to start and stop at the right place. Draw attention to the straight parts, the talls, the tails, and how letters sit on lines. Have the whole class “draw the letter in the air.” swinging their arms from the shoulder, to get the big feel of the shape of the letter, then go over the dot to dot words over and over, until each letter is learned, named, sound and shape (the feel, learned in the muscle.).
It is better next to learn letters that can be kept going. You can sound an f until you run out of breath. The whole class can try to see how long they can keep the sound going, and this gives you a chance to see that their lips are the correct shape. This is why the next letters to be learned are: I, fox, zip, man. It is at this point that the child realizes that sounding out is really saying the word slowly.

To learn the 26 letters, fifteen words are presented giving those letters except q that starts with a C, keeping those that start with l to the end, l, h, k, b, and you explain that if you start with an l, you can only add on further along the line. This means keeping b to the end, and this helps to prevent confusion of b/d. You can also say b is a bat and a ball, and the bat must be able to hit the ball along the empty line (to write) and “along the line the way we read” for reading. If there is still b/d confusion, teach the first 4 letters of the alphabet a.b.c.d, and have the whole class tap out A-B with their non-writing hand, then with their writing hand form a c as they say it, and keep going up tall to make the d as they say it. Starting a d with a c, it cannot go wrong.

l is a long line. The short u goes under and up – and down. M hums, the mouth closed, not mer. V is a valley – explain what a valley is (in the mountains).

Aim to learn a letter a day. Combine new letters to make new words to practice precise word-building. A child who knows how to read red and fox can then read rod. When he knows van, he can read ran, fan, den, vex, nod, and so on. He therefore does not need to learn words.

Notice if the pupil is holding his pencil correctly and comfortably, avoid a tight grip. It is easier to get everything right first time than to correct a bad habit. He should not press too hard. If he does, buy a propelling (mechanical) pencil with a thin lead which simply breaks when you press too hard! This works when nagging does not.

Teach every single thing. Do not hope your pupils will “catch on.” Make sure they are learning because you are teaching, direct instruction. Always provide at least one line to write on. Double-lined exercise books help to establish even-sized writing.

Teach first the 5 letters starting with C (as in cat, dog) then play with the letters to show that he can now read a, at, act, tag, got, cog (and explain it). You must be very clear in your own mind that the pupil is learning how letters work and is not learning words as wholes. He is learning to sound out.
The first two things you teach are 2 letter/sounds and how to hear sounds in words (auditory ability, phonological awareness), how to hear that c.a.t. makes cat, and that dog starts with d, leaving og which starts with o, do…g. This is fundamental to spelling.

Teach the sounds of letters, ‘e’ as in red. There is no harm in teaching the names of letters also, “ee say e”, but at first the sounds are essential.

There are no 3-letter words with a q, so this letter is introduced with “quickly” along with the idea that sometimes two letters must be together: au, that if you have a sound twice (c.k.), you only say it once, and that words can be longer than 3 sounds. “Quickly” introduces q (with u) and short y.

**Practice**

Small cards are useful, with the word writ large on one side and the picture on the other, so that they can NOT get the word from the picture. Rather, “Sound this out and you will know what a picture is on the back with seeing it!” and when they say the word, and you show them the picture, you can see the smile of satisfaction on their faces. I also use words that start with the same letter, to prevent 1st-letter-and-guess: man, map, mat, cat, cup, can, cap, cot, dog, gun, hat, and so on. The children readily grasp that all 3 letters are needed to get the word right – and that they can do this. **Nothing succeeds like success.**

You can make games (bingo, slides and ladders, Pairs), “clocks” with moving parts and other cardboard arrangements to put a vowel inside different endings, or to put different vowels into two letters (pat pet pit pot put). The games are essential today because so few storybooks are available. Level one of “Primary Phonics” is good. Once you have made a bingo set for 30 children, you can use it for 10 years; it is well worth the effort. There is so much to do, with writing, sounding out words and playing the games, that you can go quite a long way without asking the children to read books. Then when you do, they are far get placed than if you start with books before they can read at all. You can always read a story, letting the child read the words he CAN read, but letting a child learn a book by heart means he is spending too much time on that one book. Telling him words subtly tells him he can do it on his own.

To promote listening to sounds of words, dictate single words; then as you go straight through the course, dictate sentences. “Alpha to Omega” provides graded sentences.
Fifteen Words for Learning the 26 Letters
hat
quickly
bag
rib
ribs
The **main letter-groups** which must be learned after the 26 letters are given in the following pages, one side with the pictures to help if the learner forgets what the two letters say, and NOT words to be “learned”. It is the letter-groups (sounds/spelling) that have to be learned. The front of each “card” gives the child independence, so that he can work out what the letters say without asking Mum or dad all the time.

Have the whole class say three times “Two o’s says oo”, and the same for each new letter-group, then ask. “What do two o’s say?” “If you want to write the oo sound, what letters do you put?” then have the class read out the six words to practice the new letter-group. Make games, materials, use the blackboard, to give practice in learning each group of spellings.

### Main Letter Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card</th>
<th>Front</th>
<th>Back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letters picture</td>
<td><strong>key word</strong></td>
<td>practice words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ee</td>
<td><strong>tree</strong>, feel, week, seem, green, heel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>oo</td>
<td><strong>moon</strong>, cool, soon, room; look, cook, book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-ng</td>
<td><strong>ring</strong>, bang, sang, bring, song, long, hung, stung</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>sh</td>
<td><strong>fish</strong>, brush, flash; shop, ship, shut</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ch</td>
<td><strong>chin</strong>, chips, chop; rich, such, crunch, fetch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>th</td>
<td><strong>bath</strong>, path, with, think; this that, the, then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>ar</td>
<td><strong>arm</strong>, park, start, sharp, farm, yard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>or</td>
<td><strong>fork</strong>, storm, short, corn, north, morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>er</td>
<td><strong>fern</strong>, term hammer, butter, faster, ladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>ir</td>
<td><strong>skirt</strong>, shirt, first, thirty, girl, firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>ur</td>
<td><strong>fur</strong>, burn, turn, curl, murmur, hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>a.e</td>
<td><strong>cake</strong>, paper, plate, spade, skates, make</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13  e.e  even (numbers)  even, see, tree, Steve, evening, these, concrete, (2, 4, 6, 8, 10) extreme
14  i.e  pipe  pipe, time, wine tiger, stripes pie, tie
15  u.e  cube  cube, tune, flute, excuse, fumes, clue, rescue
16  -le  table  table, Keble, trifle, noble, bugle, raffle, pebble, little, bottle, struggle
17  ai  sail  sail, aim, nails, exclaim, hair, upstairs
18  ay  tray  tray, play, spray, away, Sunday
19  oi  coin  coin, boil. spoil, join, toilet, point
20  oy  toy  toy, boy, annoy, destroy, oyster
21  ea  sea  sea, beach, teach, cream, steam, hear, appear
22  ea  bread  bread, ready, heaver, healthy, head, leather
23  ce  fence  fence, princess, dance, advance, necessary, success, December
24  ci  pencil  pencil, city, accident, scissors, decide, excite
25  cy  cylinder  cylinder, Cyril, Cynthia, fancy, Nancy, bicycle
26  ge  fringe  fringe, sponge, village, bandage, garage, danger
27  gi  engine  engine, magic, tragic, digital, imagine, register, ginger
28  gy  gymnastics  gymnastics, energy, allergy, biology, Egypt
29  gu  guitar  guitar, guess, guest, guilty, guinea-pig, Guy
30  oa  loaf  loaf, soap, road, float, groan, boat
31  ou  cloud  cloud, shout, ground, south, count, trousers
32  ou  double  double, nourish, country, cousin, famous, curious
33  ow  owl  owl, cow, town, crowd, powder, now, how
ow bowl bowl, snow, throw, pillow, borrow, yellow
au launch launch, automatic, August, laundry, Paul, because, haunted
aw saw saw, paw, claw, lawn, straw, crawl, outlaw
al ball ball, tall, fall, mall, small, walk, talk, also, almost, bald, scald, salt.
wr wrist wrist, wrong, wrap, wriggle, wreck, write
kn knot know, knit, knob, knee, knuckles, know
ph telephone telephone, dolphin, alphabet, elephant, Joseph, photograph
ch anchor anchor, school, chemist, echo, Christmas, stomach-ache
mb limb limb, lamb, comb, dumb, crumb, thumb
tion addition addition, action, attention, mention, portion
sion mansion mansion, confession, expression, impression
ie field field, yield, shield, chief, thief, relief, relieve
ie eight eight, vein, veil, reign, weight, weigh, sleigh
be behind behind, become, because, belong, behave, believe
re refuse refuse, remind, regret, realize, result, remember
de decay decay, delay, defy, defend, desire, depend, declare
Rules

Here are a few general rules to help understand how letters work.

If a vowel is followed by e, the first vowel says its name: see, tie, toe, clue. This is a very strong rule and works even if the two vowels are split by a consonant (sometimes called magic e): game, Peter, wine, home, cube; but NOT by two consonants which are a barrier: hammer, better, winner, hotter, blubber.

The ending –le works like the e above.

The ending –ing works like the e above so if there is –ing, we do not need the e: bake, baking; dine, dining, tune, tuning.

If you WANT to keep a short vowel before –ing, double the last letter hop, hopping, hopped; hope, hoping, hoped strip, stripping, stripped; stripe, striping, striped

No English words (except I, you) ends in q, u, v, j, or i.
q followed by u
u is followed by e, or changed to w:- value, rescue: ou/ow, au/aw.

The sound of j at the end is spelt –ge or –dge.

i/y: i at the end is changed to y (except foreign words like ski, or spaghetti): fry, fries, fried, frying; hurry, hurries, hurried, hurrying: With –ing, we come back to y to avoid two i’s together (except ski-ing that has a hyphen); happy, happier, happiest, happily, happiness; pony, ponies; cherry, cherries (change y to i, and add –es.). This works just the same after a and after o: ay, change the y to i: pay, paint; and oy, change the y to i: boy, boil.

Remember y (like i) can say both short and long sound:
Short: funny, silly, family, syrup, dyslexia, yes, yellow,
Long: python, hydrant, dynamite, multiply, cycle, defy, apply, reply.

Notice that ea, ou, and ow have two sounds each.
ea can also say ay in a few words: steak, break, great, bear, pear, wear, tear.
ou can say ðð: you, youth, group, soup, coupon, route.

-ght: gh has Gone Home (is silent). light, might, fight, sight, bright, flight. etc.
eight, weight; weigh, neigh, sleigh; ought, bought, brought, thought, fought, taught, caught, daughter, slaughter, naughty.
BUT laugh, laughter.
**ough**: cough where *ough* says ÒFF
  trough ÙFF
  enough
  rough
  tough
  plough OW as in OWL
  bough
  through ŐO
  dough Ő as (oh)
  although
  thorough Ū as in cup
  borough

In Greek words, *ph* says f (dolphin, photograph), and *ch* says k (echo, chemist).

- *ti*- can say sh: patient, cautious, essential, confusion, confidential,
on often says un: won, son, done, front, person, onion
ti+on = tion (shun) action, mention, direction, sensation

The vowel before –tion is usually long: sensātion, ventilātion, mōtion,
pollūtion.
*zhun* is spelled sion: precision, telvision. (Note: cushion; transition, volition,
demolition)

WA usually sounds like WŌ: was, want, what, swan.
QUA usually sounds like QUŌ: squash, quality.
WAR sounds like WŌR: warm, warning, swarm.

The long sound of ŭ can be:
  *ue*: statue, tissue, rescue, residue
  *ue*: cube, tune, amuse, computer
  *ew*: new, few, screw, chew, stew
  *ui*: suit, fruit, recruit, bruise, cruise
  *u*: music, union, usual, uniform, duty

*al* always says aw in b-al-l, call, fall, tall wall
  w-al-k, talk, chalk, stalk
and also, always; altogether; bald, scald, salt
Silent letters:

k-: knot, knob, knit, knee, know
w-: wrong, wring, wrestle, wreath, wrap
-b-: climb, comb, lamb, limb, dumb, thumb, crumb
-l-: half, chalk, palm psalm
-n-: hymn (hymnal), autumn (autumnal), solemn (solemnity), column (columnar)
-g-: sign (signal), malign (malignant), resign (resignation)
-l-: yolk, folk, Norfork
-e-: cake, Pete, time, tote, mute; have, blue; chance, change; little; are

This brief presentation is for TEACHING. It is simple, cumulative, logical, thorough and multisensory. you know what you are doing, with clear goals all the way, and it does not confuse. it is safe for all, from 3 up, infants, remedial, adults, dyslexics, anyone. It is called phonics.

The learning task is minimal and brisk. Children who can aready read can improve their spelling, and are not wasting their time. Letters and letter-groups make up less than 100 items, whereas with look-say there are taught 250 sight words just to start with, and having learned them the learner still has to learn the letter groups.

Dyslexia is an inborn, latent potential to muddlement, and often goes unrecognized. Look-say makes dyslexics needlessly word-blind. Systematic phonics is safe for all. Good phonics will raise the national average 7+ARQ (average reading quotient at 7+) to 110.
Essential Phonics Decodable Word Reader
by Donald L. Potter
April 4, 2009

cat: cat at.
dog: tag got dot cot dad Tod gag rod.
fox: fat fog fad fax ax.
zip: pat tap pig dig gap pit pot tip top tip zap fix.
man: tan fan not map Nat fin tam mat not mag mit tin pan nap dam mad tad Dan miff mop nod nit.
van: vat vip vex vim
jug: jazz Jim jam Jill up cut tug gut gum fuzz muff fun cup mutt mitt jump jut
wig: wag wax wip win wit
leg: pill pal lug lamp lap gal let lad lip lit mill will fill lag till lip dell log gull flex fell till tell wet set met get den Ned led
sun: (unvoiced s) less loss sat sit sap sup sis sips sand cats cots dots pots tips fuss sad cuts fast last fist list cost lost muss as is sag gas pass moss toss miss lass
hat: hit hill fill will gill hand hot hum hug hag had hut hunt huff him hip hop
quickly: quack kid keg kit kiss back lack Mack sack wick lick yes yet Mick sick kill kiss kit Kim crack quit quick quiz duck pack pick lock rock dock mock neck tack tick

bag: big bug bog beg hen web boss bid bit dab ban cab tab
Bill sub bus slab stab blak blag but ban nan jab bin
Ben bless nab buzz tub bump bum tab

rib: run ram rat rig rust rip rug Russ rill rack rick rag rock

ribs: (voiced s = z): dads fads pigs digs fans fins pills laps lip legs kegs bins runs rags has

Letters are underlined when they are introduced.
When the pupils can read and spell all these words, start them on the letter-groups.
Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

April 3, 2009

It appears to Mona McNee and myself that curriculum designers (for inexplicable reasons) are unaware of how a good phonics-first program is to be structured for maximum effectiveness. Mona has graciously given me permission to publish in somewhat altered format her excellent little phonics booklet, *Essential Phonics*. This little pamphlet outlines what Mona and I consider an optimum program. No program that teaches less should be considered for school adoption. More detailed instructions are available in her complete program, *Step by Step*.

In Mona’s program, phonics is encapsulated in real words. The student learns to read the words slowly in order to extract the sounds. The words serve as anchors for the memory.

For more information on why and how we should teach intensive, systematic, synthetic phonics-first, visit Don’s web site: [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net)


Mona McNee’s concern about reading started in 1970 when, having seen her Down’s syndrome son fail with professional teaching, she found that with no training but relying on a phonic scheme, *Royal Road Readers*, old-fashioned sounding out and common sense, she was able to teach him.

In May 1975 she became the remedial teacher at a Middle School, and soon concluded that nearly all her pupils could have got it right first time if they had been spared look-say, the whole-word start.

She retired in 1981 and by now has taught well over 500 dyslexics, plus other young children and some adults. She believes we could be better off starting with letters/sounds. Mona was a key person in founding the U.K. Chapter of the (American) Reading Reform Foundation. She did the newsletter from 1989 to 2000, then handed it over others.

Her book (*Step by Step*) provides the vital phonics base the National Curriculum (British) now requires. Teachers who want to TEACH reading can use it. Otherwise, parents can use it to schoolproof their own child. It can be used for any age, pre-school to adult, dyslexic or not, and for people just learning English.

Mona writes in her *Step by Step*: “Guessing is a terrible thing. It is not a “strategy” for reading, but a danger signal telling the teacher that the pupil is not reading from the letters. The only “Don’t!” in my lessons is “Don’t guess!” (25)

Geraldine Rodgers has published a major history of reading that includes British and American programs: *The History of Beginning Reading: From Teaching by Sound to Teaching by Meaning*.

Mona tells me that *Step by Step* is available for $10.00 bill and address. Mona McNee, 2 Keats Avenue, Whiston, Merseyside L 35 2 XR, England.

Notice that *Essential Phonics* and *Step by Step* work from letters to sound, rather than from sounds to letters. Mona tells me this is an important distinction.

Last edited by Donald L. Potter, Odessa, TX. 4/12/09.