

WORKSHOP INDEX

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Alphabetics

Objective

In the upcoming pages, we'll examine basic ideas about phonological and phonemic awareness. We'll review the basic terminology of the discipline (morphology, graphemes, orthography, etc.) and touch on some ideas about how to instruct students in phonics.

Alphabetic Basics: Phonemic Awareness

At the most basic level of alphabetic basics is the Alphabetic Principle—the idea that sounds can be represented by symbols. We'll explore this root concept here, as well as how it applies to teaching young students to read with fluency and comprehension.

Words About Words

As a discipline, phonology may have more than its fair share of jargon. Let's review some of the key words.

Phonological Terms

Term	Definition	Example
Phonological	Recognition of the distinct segments of spoken sound: words, syllables, and phonemes	Let's take the word kitty . Students should be able to recognize that the word is composed of four distinct sounds, or phonemes: /k/ /i/ /t/ and /e/
Phonemic Awareness	Recognition of phonemes, ability to segment words into	Students should be able to recognize and recombine phonemes to make new words. For example, a student exhibits phonemic awareness by

	constituent phonemes, ability to blend phonemes and substitute phonemes to make new words	recognizing that the /k/ in kitty can also be used to begin the word call or can't
Phoneme	Smallest unit of sound	/s/, /ch/, /f/, /e/, /sh/
Syllable	A word or distinct segment of a word that is naturally pronounced in a single, uninterrupted vocalization	cant can•ti•le•ver chalk chalk•i•er e•ryth•ro•my•cin grid•dle
Voiced (and unvoiced) consonants	Voiced consonants make your vocal cords vibrate; unvoiced do not	Voiced: b, d, g Unvoiced: p, t, k
Morpheme	Smallest unit having meaning: base words, prefixes, and suffixes	biology {bio-}=”life” {-logy}=”science” biologist {-ist}=”one who practices” chokers {choke}=”obstruct the trachea” {-er}=”one who [chokes]” {-s}=”more than one”
Phonics	Study of relationships between sounds and their written form	In the word rock, the first letter, the r, makes the /r/ sound. The o sounds like ahh, and the ck sounds like /k/. You’ll see the ck after short vowel sounds, like in rock, sick, tack, luck, neck, and chick, but not after long vowel sounds, like in lake, nuke, poke, hike, and cheek. Note too that in words that end with a “vowel + consonant + e” combination (VCE), the vowel is long, which means that it sounds like its name: ay, ee, eye, oh, you.

You’ll be able to link back to this table down the line, but for now let’s look more closely at some of the key terms.

Phonemes

If we smile and press the tongue to the back of the roof of the mouth and force a burst of air over the stubborn tongue, we'd have the phoneme /ch/. (The slashes tell you that we're referring to a single phoneme.) You can't break /ch/ down any further if you still want the sound /ch/, as in the word choke. Phonemes, then, are the smallest elements of spoken language.

The fact that /ch/ contains two letters is a little frustrating for most of us, but it just happens to be a limitation of the English alphabet that we don't have a single, unified symbol—a letter, or grapheme—to represent the single, unified phoneme we hear at the beginning of the word choke. So “ch” is also a grapheme, even though it's two letters. And since these two letters form a single phoneme, we call it a digraph. The digraph that represents the “ch” sound is /ch/.

Here's how this information may be presented in a test question:

Question

Which of the following represents the smallest element of spoken language?

- A. Grapheme
- B. Morpheme
- C. Digraph
- D. Phoneme

REVEAL ANSWER

Every little sound of every word ever spoken in any language is a phoneme, though each language makes use of a different number of phonemes in order to say what they need to say. For instance, native Spanish speakers have no problem trilling their “r”s, as the trilled “r” is an important Spanish-language phoneme. Many English speakers, however, find it difficult to produce a trilled “r,” as evidenced by our one-time fascination with repeating a declaration that such-and-such national brand of potato chips has “rrrridges.”

While it may seem clear that graphemes match up perfectly with their respective phonemes, English is a weird language. Consider this group of graphemes:

ghoti