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## Crack The Code: Understanding Phonics Terms With Ease

Hello, parents and early career teachers! If you've ever found yourself puzzled by phonics terminology, you're not alone. Here's a straightforward guide to help demystify common phonics terms:

BTW- so sorry this list isn't in alphabetical order. I have grouped terms together that are linked in some way. Hope that's ok. Let's dive in.

**Letter** – A single character from the alphabet, such as 'a', 'b', or 'c'.

**Grapheme** – A written symbol that represents a single sound (phoneme). This can be a single letter or a combination of letters.

*Examples:* 'a' is a grapheme that makes the /a/ sound; 'sh' makes the the /ʃ/ sound as in 'ship'.

**Letter Sound** – The sound commonly associated with a letter of the alphabet.

*Examples:* 's' makes the /s/ sound; 'm' makes the /m/ sound.

**Pure Sound** – The isolated pronunciation of a phoneme without adding an extra 'uh' sound(schwa).

*Examples:* 's' is pronounced with a continuous /s/ as in a hissing snake, not 'suh'; 'p' is pronounced with a sharp /p/, not 'puh'.

**Phoneme** – The smallest unit of sound in a word. English has approximately 44 phonemes. Phonemes can be represented by one letter or more than one letter.

*Examples:* The word 'cat' has three phonemes: /k/, /a/, /t/. The word ship also has three phonemes /sh/, /i/, /p/.

*Note:* There is a small difference between letter sounds and phonemes. A letter sound is the sound a single letter makes e.g 's' = /s/ however Phonemes are not tied to just single letters as shown in the /sh/, /i/, /p/ example where two letters /sh/ two letters, make one sound/phoneme.

**Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence (GPC)** - This stands for Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence. It is the relationship between a grapheme and the phoneme (sounds) they represent.

*Example:* The letter 'a' can represent the /a/ sound as in 'apple'.

**Letter Name** – The official name of a letter, which differs from the sound it represents.

*Example:* The letter 's' is called 'ess' and typically represents the /s/ sound, as in 'sun'.

**Stretchy Sounds (Continuous Sounds)** – These are long, sustained sounds or simply continuous sounds(phonemes) . We say that they can be “stretched” out.

*Examples:* /m/ as in 'man', /s/ as in 'sun', /n/ as in 'net'.

**Bouncy Sounds (Short Sounds)** – Short, sharp sounds that aren't stretched out.

*Examples:* /b/ as in 'bat', /d/ as in 'dog', /g/ as in 'goat'.

**Digraph** – A combination of two letters that represent one sound.

*Examples:* 'sh' as in 'ship', 'ch' as in 'chat'.

**Split Digraph** – A digraph where two letters combine to make one sound but they are separated or split up by another letter.

*Example:* 'a-e' in 'cake' represents the /eɪ/ sound.

**Trigraph** – A combination of three letters that represent one sound.

*Example:* 'igh' as in 'night' represents the /aɪ/ sound.

**Blend** – To combine individual sounds to form a word.

*Example:* Blending /c/, /a/, /t/ produces the word 'cat'.

Note: We blend sounds together to **decode** a word.

**Blending for Reading** – This means combining the individual sounds in a written word to read it.

*Example:* Reading 'dog' by blending or combining the sounds /d/, /o/, /g/.

**Oral Blending** – This means hearing separate sounds and pushing them together to say a whole word. You don't look at any letters — you just listen to the sounds and blend them with your voice.

*Example:* If you hear the sounds /c/ /a/ /t/, you blend them together and say "cat."

**Segment** – This means breaking a word down into its separate sounds, one by one.

*Example:* If you hear the word "ship," you can split it into the sounds /sh/, /i/, /p/.

Note: Segmenting is the inverse of blending and children are taught to segment a word in order to spell it.

**Schwa** - The schwa is the most common vowel sound in English. It is an unstressed vowel sound that sounds like /uh/. Found in words like balloon or father.

**Tricky words** – Tricky words are words that have one or more letters that do not follow predictable letter-sound correspondences. This makes them difficult to sound out or decode using normal phonics rules. For example, the word *said* is tricky because the 'ai' in the middle makes the /e/ sound.

**Common exception words** – These are words that appear frequently in both texts and spoken language but can't be decoded using normal phonics rules. These words don't follow standard spelling patterns or may contain unusual letter combinations.

*Example:* Some examples of common exception words are: the, said, want, there

**Alphabetic principle** – The alphabetic principle is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between letters and spoken sounds (phonemes). It means that each letter or group of letters represents a specific

sound, and this relationship helps children decode (read) and encode (spell) words.

**Phonics** – Phonics is a way of teaching children how to read and write using the alphabetic principle.

Through phonics, children learn to:

- recognise the sound each letter makes,
- recognise the sounds that letter combinations or graphemes make like 'ay' and 'ee',
- blend these sounds from left to right to read full words.

**Note:** Put simply – *phonological awareness is all about spoken sounds, while phonics connects those sounds to written letters.*

**Phonological awareness** – Phonological awareness is the skill of manipulating, noticing, and working with the sounds in spoken language. This can include spotting rhyming words, recognising alliteration, breaking sentences into individual words, clapping out syllables, and blending or separating sounds like onset and rime. The most advanced stage of this development is *phonemic awareness*, which typically comes last.

**Phonemic awareness** – Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and work with the individual sounds (called phonemes) in spoken words. This includes skills like blending sounds together to make a word, breaking a word into its separate sounds, and adding, changing, or removing sounds to explore how words can change.

**Systematic, explicit approach to teaching phonics** – Phonics instruction should be both *systematic* and *explicit*:

- **Systematic:** Teach phonics in a logical, clearly defined sequence, starting with simple, frequently used sounds and progressing to more complex ones. For example, begin with single-letter sounds (like /s/, /a/, /t/) before moving to digraphs (like "sh" or "ch"). By starting this way, children can form and read words early in the reading process.
- **Explicit:** Directly teach the relationships between graphemes and phonemes, rather than leaving children to infer them. Clear guidance prevents confusion and ensures all children, regardless of their starting point, can succeed.

**Synthetic Phonics** – A method commonly used in the UK to teach reading. Children are explicitly taught the sounds (phonemes) that letters or groups of letters make and how to blend these sounds to read words. It is called *synthetic* because learners are taught to *synthesise*, or blend, sounds

together in sequence to read whole words.

*Example:* Knowing the sounds for *c*, *a*, and *t* allows them to blend and read the word *cat*.

Note: Systematic phonics is also known as synthetic phonics

**Sight Words** – These are commonly used words that children are encouraged to recognise instantly, without having to sound them out. Many sight words don't follow regular phonics rules, making them difficult to decode.

*Examples include: the, said, was, and come.*

Learning sight words helps build reading fluency and confidence, especially in early readers.

**Decoding** – The ability to recognise how written letters (graphemes) represent spoken sounds (phonemes), and to use this knowledge to read new or unfamiliar words.

**Alternative Grapheme** – Some sounds (phonemes) can be spelled in more than one way. For example, the /igh/ sound might be written as 'y' (as in *fly*), 'ie' (as in *pie*), or 'igh' (as in *night*), depending on the word.

## That's it for now

I hope this guide has helped make phonics terminology a little clearer and more approachable. Understanding these key terms can make a big difference when supporting children on their reading journey—whether you're teaching them in the classroom or helping at home. Remember, you don't need to know everything at once—just keep building your confidence step by step.

P.S If you think there are terms that I have missed out, do say on Instagram.