

What About Phonics?

— Developing Phonetic Skills With Key Words —

It's Not Whether To Incorporate Phonics, But How and When

For decades, arguments have raged over whether to emphasize phonics — the sound-symbol relationship — when introducing a child to reading. Some say an overt, measurable mastery of phonics is essential for a child to succeed. So they begin there. Others use basal readers — with limited, controlled vocabulary — to give children experience with reading. As the child reads, they prompt them to use phonics to sound out unfamiliar words. The *Kids Write To Read* approach falls somewhere between these two positions, as it has a strong phonics component. But rather than have a child memorize the letter/sound connections in isolation — the memory of these connections is **systematically cultivated through writing**. So with this approach, writing comes first, and through it the child develops skill — **not only with phonics, but with and other reading strategies** — so that reading emerges naturally, from the entire process.

So the question is definitely **not whether** to help a child learn the multitude of sound/symbol relationships (of which there are far more than 26). Of course a child needs phonics to spell as they're writing — and later to sound out unfamiliar words as they're reading. So the issue is not *whether*, but *when* we emphasize phonics and precisely *how* we go about doing it. And here's the quick answer:

When: Systematic exposure to phonics begins **as the child first watches and listens to the sounds of the letters being used to spell their Key Words.**

How: As with most all else, we **model this new skill in a real-life situation, with strong meaning for the child.** And we do this by translating the child's own "talk" into printed "Key Words."

A child who moves from Speech Directly into Books,
MASTERS 1 SKILL:
READING

A child who moves from Speech Through Writing, then into Books,
MASTERS 2 SKILLS:
READING AND WRITING!

So we don't treat phonics as a memory exercise, as we do with the multiplication table. And we don't begin with books (although we do read books to them, early and often). Instead, we help the child **absorb phonics through it's use**, by systematically incorporating it into the writing process. With this, the child develops the ability to write their own thoughts. Then at their own pace and with no struggle, they begin to realize they recognize the same words they've been writing — now in signs, on cereal boxes, and in books. So when a child moves from speech through writing, they gain the ability to 1) write their own thoughts, and 2) read what others write. And they do in in much the same way they learned to speak.

In sum: The child's Key Word — the "caption for their mind picture" — is a powerful magnet for attaching phonics and other literacy skills. Repeatedly watching as their Key Words are spelled, the child automatically absorbs phonetic connections — in much the same way they learned to speak. Following is how we help them do this.

Activities To Help a Child Develop Phonetic Skills

Before we begin the two phonics activities described below, we introduce the children to the alphabet. In a whole group setting, we first teach them to sing the Alphabet Song. Later, we have them slowly sing the song as someone points to each letter on a simple alphabet chart.

This group activity is only to know what we mean when we speak of the alphabet and say the name of a letter. They don't need know the name of every letter before we begin with the two phonics activities described next. They just need to know what we're talking about.

Be careful to slow way down here!

the
alphabet
song

D G D G D A D
 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P
 G D A D G D A
 Q R S and T U V W (dou-ble u) and X Y Z
 D G D
 Now I've said my A B C's.
 G D A D
 Tell me what you think of me.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

First children learn to sing the song. Then they learn to point to each letter on a chart as they slowly sing.

Activities To Help a Child Develop Phonetic Skills, Cont.

As children become more and more familiar with the alphabet in this way, we also carry out the following two basic activities:

1. **Phonemic Awareness Play.** In a group setting, we draw the children's attention to the *individual sounds* they're speaking and have them play with them. This, so they can readily *notice, hear and differentiate between the different sounds when the time comes to write them.*
2. **Spelling Key Words.** Sitting with an individual child, the person taking their dictation draws their attention to the *letters needed to spell* their Key Words. Each time a child gets a new Key Word, they watch as that person says the name and/or sounds that make up the word and writes the letter needed.

Watching as their Key Words are written, the child soon *absorbs* enough of the connections to help supply some of them. After repeated experience with this, they have enough of those connections to begin writing on their own. At that point, they can use the same materials for spelling as they used in the phonemic awareness activities — *if* the type of phonics materials used lends itself to that. Some will, others won't. So before we examine phonics activities in more detail, we'll pause to consider two different types of phonics materials.

Alphabet/Noun Charts and Sound/Story Cartoon Systems

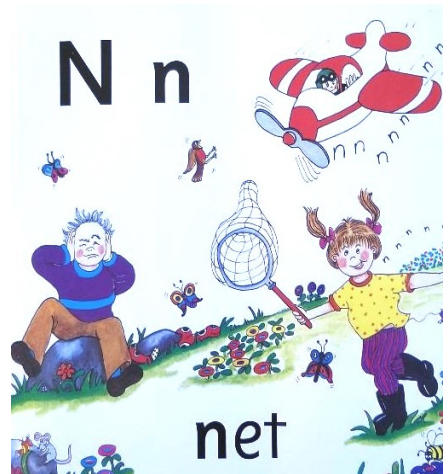
There are two basic types of phonics materials, and they accomplish different things:

1. Alphabet/Noun Charts. Most classrooms have noun charts: "A" is for **Apple**, "B" is for **Baby**, "C" is for **Cat**, etc. These are good for learning the *one most common* way to spell the different sounds in English. But they don't show all the *uncommon ways* some of the sounds can be spelled. For instance, the "S" sound as is "*step*," *can also be spelled with a "C" as in cent.* Yet the alphabet noun charts don't reflect this. So they are very limited when it comes to spelling.

2. Story/Sound Systems. This type of phonics material has a chart for each of the sounds spoken in English. Each chart connects a sound to the story suggested by a cartoon and shows the common way that sound can be spelled.

For instance, the story in the sound cartoon shown here could be, "The insects and birds are buzzing around the man. The girl and the plane are making an "Nnnnn" sound. So he's holding his ears and feeling a little crazy." In the phonemic awareness activity, the children would listen to the story, then make the "Nnnnn" sound while holding their ears. They might also pretend to duck so they don't get hit by the plane. They love acting this out and after just one time, will probably remember the sound associated with the cartoon.

With these connections established, you can also use these charts as an extremely valuable support for spelling — by having them not only show the common way to spell a sound — *but every way possible.* This chart, for instance, can also appear at the heading of a "Wall Strip Dictionary" that shows the "Nnnnn" is spelled "N" as as in **Nose** -- and "Kn" as in "**Know.**" (How this is done is explained in more detail below.)



To help you decide whether to use a sound/story system, we look briefly now at where to find one. With this, you can first see how feasible it would be for you to adopt this idea. Then we'll examine in detail how a sound system can be used.

Sources For Sound/Story Phonics Materials

First, the **Open Court** reading program has sound charts, so if you're teaching, you may have them somewhere in your district. Also, a member of the Facebook Group, *Helping All Kids Write To Read* brought to the group's attention the set published by **Jolly Phonics**. (See last page.) It also has books with activities the children could use for practice, during their "free choice" time.

Phonemic Awareness Activities: introducing a Story/Sound System

The teacher makes up a story suggested by the picture. These will be different from place to place, as they depend on what will resonate with the children. Once you have decided on the stories, following is how you would introduce the cartoons.

Before introducing each day's new sound, review previous sounds by showing the cartoons in quick succession while the group calls out the sound. (You might also mention the story briefly, but it's not usually necessary.)

Then introduce the new cartoon, *only one a day*, referring to it as "Today's Sound." (Begin with consonants.) For the new sound, tell a very brief story suggested by the cartoon, ignoring the letter that appears on it. The focus is only on **distinguishing the sound itself, plus connecting the story to the cartoon.**

After telling the story, have the children play with the sound in a variety of ways:

- **Feel the sound**, as the children in the picture are feeling how the "Nnnnn" sound vibrates their nose,
- **Identify whose name begins** with that sound,
- **Listen as each child substitutes** Today's Sound for the beginning sound of their name,
- **Identify some things that begin with the sound.** This might be one of their own physical attributes or an article of clothing they're wearing. Or it might be watching as a child goes to find two things in the room that start with the sound.



Immediately following this play, the one single cartoon is displayed in a place of honor and referred to during the day and just before dismissal.

Create a Chart For Beginners

To create a chart for beginners, the large cartoons can be copied, then reduced enough to fit all of them together on one chart. They are glued onto a chart in alphabetical order and placed on the wall where the children can easily see the letter appearing on each cartoon. Here's an example of the first row of the chart:



Using The Chart For Beginners At Steps 2 — 4

A child operating at Steps 2 - 4, uses the chart above to search for the **ONE new sound** they'll focus on each day as someone writes their Key Word. Here's how that session goes:

As the person taking the child's dictation (the *Helper*) writes the word, they say each sound as they go, briefly hesitating — waiting to see if the child can supply any of the letters needed to spell it. In this case, a child has been working at Step 2 for awhile and knows how to use the chart. He's asked for "robbers," so with the Helper's pen paused as if ready to write, they make the "Rrrrr" sound and ask whether the child remembers how to spell that sound. If not, the Helper asks him *which cartoon makes that sound*. If he doesn't remember, the Helper reminds him of the story about the motorcycle with the "rrrr" coming out of the exhaust.

Using The Chart For Beginners At Steps 2 — 4, Cont.

Both say the sound together again, and the child goes off to find the cartoon with that story on the chart. He finds the “rrrrrrr’s” coming from the dog and returns to show which letter is needed. He forms it on the table, with the index finger of his writing hand. If he forgets the letter by the time he returns, he goes back to look again.

Having to connect the sound together with the letter for that long, most children will remember that connection the next time they need it. So we’re *capitalizing on their ability to absorb connections* — just as we all do when we help a child learn to speak. (This instead of asking them to memorize all connections or learn spelling rules, to which there always seem to be exceptions.)

Independent Writers Use The Wall Strip Dictionary For Spelling

When independent writers — children at Steps 5 and 6 — need to spell a word, they use the cartoons reduced in size and made into a *Wall Strip Dictionary*. The set of strips hangs from cup hooks, in alphabetical order. When a child needs to spell a word, they walk along the row of strips and find the cartoon for the beginning sound of the word they need. (Some sing the Alphabet Song to help know how far down the row of strips to look.)



Once they find the correct story, the child first looks to see whether the word they need is already written on the strip (because someone else had previously asked to have it written there). If yes, they take it to a table and copy it.

If not there, they take it to a Helper. First the Helper checks to see if the word is already there. If so, they cover the words below and above it -- leaving 4 or 5 words showing for the child to choose from. A child will then usually recognize the one they need, without further help. So then they copy it. If the word is not there, the child helps supply the letters needed, as the Helper spells it. (Children don’t write on the strips.)

The Wall Strip Dictionaries Are Organic — You Grow Them With The Children!

Rest assured that **you do not need to know ahead of time** all the different ways the many sounds in English can be spelled. All you need is a chart that isolates each of the sounds spoken in English and ties each to a cartoon story. If an uncommon way to spell one of the sounds is missing from the Wall Strip Dictionary you’ve made, you simply add it when a child asks for a word beginning with that sound. For example, if a child asks how to spell “**wrong**,” and “**wr**” does not appear on the set of cartoons you have, you simply write it at the head of the dictionary strip and add the word to the list.

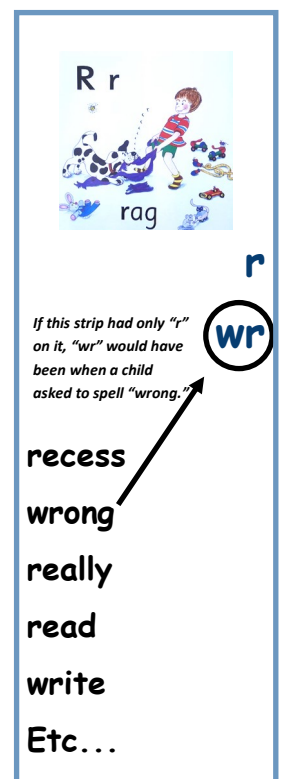
The Wall Strip Dictionaries were developed in a K-2 classroom, which had no other spelling program. With it, the children became remarkably good spellers. Yet it’s not unusual for a child to get 100% on a spelling test, only to misspell some of the same words as they write. So while the idea of using sound/story cartoons in this way may seem a bit complex, it’s well worth considering.

(Instead of Wall Strips, parents can make an individual dictionary books, with one or two cartoons heading each page — with space below each cartoon for words to be spelled.)

Sound/Story Cartoons are NOT Necessary For Key Words and The Steps

Before we end the discussion of phonics, let’s be clear: You do **not** need to go the more complex route of a Sound/Story system. You can use simple alphabet/noun charts to model for your children how their Key Words are spelled, and they will still become skilled, enthusiastic writers. The sound/story system is effective, but it does take more time with the children, and the Wall Strip Dictionaries take even more time to set up. So if this all sounds too complex and time consuming, you can go as far as the chart for common spelling for the sounds — and forget about the Wall Strip Dictionary. Or — you can forget the sound/story system entirely, simply teach the alphabet and then say the names and common the sounds the letters make, as you write the child’s Key Words.

With that said, for those who may want to use a sound/story system, following is a summary of the activities to do it.



Summary Of Progression of Activities For the Sound/Story Cartoons

Following is the progression of activities a child carries out to learn to spell words — and ultimately to decode/read print:

1. Learn the alphabet, using The Alphabet Song and a simple alphabet chart,
2. Tie the sounds to cartoon stories and play with one new sound a day (ignoring the letters on the chart),
3. Help supply the letters needed while someone writes their Key Word, using Chart for Beginners,
4. Use the Wall Strip Dictionary to spell words needed for children writing independently.

Overview Of One Version Of Sound/Story Cartoons

Here's a photo of all Jolly Phonics cartoons. This system was brought to our attention by a member of the Facebook group, Helping All Kids Learn To Read. (And with a google search you might find others you like better.) But this set is well done and costs less than \$15. To see it on Amazon, copy and paste in this link: https://www.amazon.com/s?k=jolly+phonics+wall+frieze+in+print+letters&crd=2BTWTSYNIWQF9&sprefix=Jolly+Phonics+Wa%2Caps%2C234&ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_16



This frieze has seven sections that can be put up individually. Or they can be used to form a continuous strip around the wall. Each illustration can also be laminated for use alone. Or each can be reduced to create the charts as shown on page 4.