

PD 5 SHORT VOWELS

Most words in English are a combination of open sounds (vowels) and closed or stopped sounds (consonants).



cat



fish



dog

How do we articulate?

Air is pushed up from the lungs through the larynx (vocal cords). The cords vibrate to produce a continuous sound. Think the doctor's instruction, "Say aaaah".

This sound is then shaped by the vocal tract – the tongue, the soft palate, teeth, nose and especially the lips. The speaker selects one or more words from English and shapes the word.

As an example, the word **fish** has three articulation stages:

- 1 The teeth come down to rest on the inside of the lower lip ... when the breath is released in a puff with the lips open the sound "f" is produced¹;
- 2 The "i" (the vowel itself) is produced when the lips are pulled back, the mouth is opened ... and a short burst of sound from high in the palate is released;
- 3 The tongue rises high up (to narrow the passage of air), the lips puff out (kissing position), and a shallow groove in the centre of the tongue allows the breath out (like steam escaping) – "sh".

¹ <http://www.speechlanguage-resources.com/speech-sounds-f.html>



“f”



“i”



“sh”

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Amazingly, this all happens in milliseconds. Most children can do it from the age of two.³

Why have vowels?

Vowels are the nucleus of all spoken language.

“Vowels are like magnets and attract consonants to them, especially at the beginning of syllables.”⁴

All words in English (except for “I” and “A”) are clustered around vowels. The vowel sound is the sonic ‘core’ of the word – the central burst of articulated sound. The consonants are what mold the sounds into recognizable words.

Of the 200 most common words in the English language⁵, 82 (41%) are shaped like this: an initial consonant, **a middle vowel**, and a final consonant (s) **CVC**.

eg **been, big, but, can, good, hand, him, kind, long, man, most, right, said, was**

If you add in all other single syllable words with **a middle vowel** but extra silent letters (typically the magic ‘e’) like

eg **came, give, have, home, house, live, made, name, page, take, write**

the percentage goes up to 105 (52%). Of the 200 most common words, only 20 are polysyllabic, mainly with two syllables (eg before). So the pattern is a strong one.

² Blevins, W. (2006), *Phonics from A to Z*, Scholastic

³ Crystal, D. (2006) *How Language Works*, Penguin

⁴ Stone, L. (2018) *Reading for Life*, Routledge

⁵ Fry, Kress & Fountoukidis, (2000) *The Reading Teacher’s Book of Lists*, Prentice Hall

Teaching phonics entails having children focus on the sounds of the letters. One useful place to start is with the vowels.

The two types of vowels

The identification of vowel sounds is straight forward. There are two sorts: “short” and “long” vowels.

Letter	“Short”	“Long”	Examples
a	/æ/	/eɪ/	mat / mate
e	/ɛ/	/i:/	met / meat
i	/ɪ/	/aɪ/	win / wine
o	/ɒ/	/oo/	not/note
u	/ʌ/	//ju:/	cub / cube

The short vowels tend to occur in short, one syllable words:

eg **bad rat red jet hit dig dog box fun jug**

They are “short” sounds relative to the long vowels, where the vowel sound is sustained – bad versus bade, rat versus rate.

eg **fade rate reed cheat bite sight toe boat cute huge**

Teaching the short vowels *before* the more complicated long vowels conforms to the standard pedagogic rule of - simple first ... more complex later.

Teaching the short vowels

The first thing to be established is that we are not looking at the “name” of the letter, but the **sound**.



Children who are familiar with the alphabet will recognize that there are two forms – “big letters” and “small letters” (capitals and minuscules, or “upper case” and “lower case”⁶). Both are of course necessary, but when we get to the level of actual text - it is the small letter that needs to be the focus. Therefore, we are dealing mainly with **lower case** letters in preparing children for text.

It is worth noting that ideally teachers should use the ‘single decker’ ‘a’:

a

Not the double decker version.

a

The Latin “alpha” (**a** with the curling top loop), commonly seen in printed books, is a charming historical artifact, dating from the invention of printing. *But* it is less easily recognisable to beginning readers.⁷ Children need to not only recognize the letter, but begin to write/draw it. A single “apple” shape for the “a” (*the single decker a*) is far easier to spot, *and* to write.

To repeat, the child needs to focus on the sound of the letter, not its name – “**a**” (to rhyme with **hat**), *not* “AEEY” (to rhyme with hate); “e” (to rhyme with pet); “i” (to rhyme with sit); “o” (to rhyme with hot); “u” (to rhyme with pup).

Learning to chant the “alphabet song” (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, etc) is a great starting point for familiarisation with the alphabet. But children need to see that **letters** stand for **sounds**.

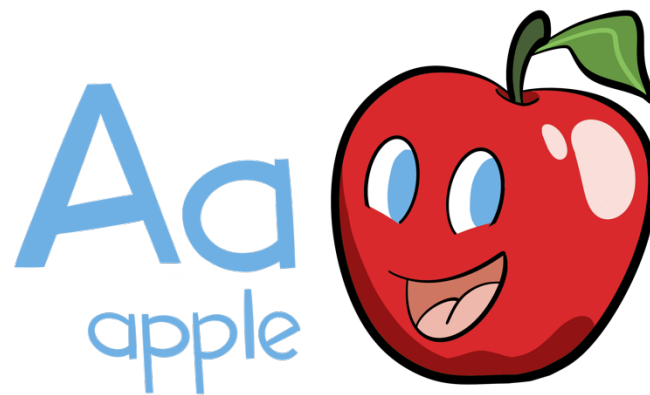
a e i o u

While there is a range techniques for teaching vowels, many educators will use tactile aids – blocks, letter tiles, colored paper letters and the like.

⁶ These terms date from early printing days, when typesetters would keep the capitals in a top shelf, and the minuscules in a bottom shelf – hence upper and lower case.

⁷ In Ziptales *Easy Readers*, the single decker “**a**” is used inside the lessons throughout.

A most useful aid is pictures of common objects with the featured initial vowel sound:



Explicit teaching of each letter, and multiple repetitions, is vital – so children commit these correspondences to their long-term memory.

A reminder (see Paper 2) - children have limited mental processing power⁸, especially for new material. It is important to deliver new concepts in small doses. The NRP report⁹ suggests short sessions of approximately 15 minutes per day in kindergarten, and longer in Grades 1 and 2.

Ziptales and short vowels

Long vowels can be a little complicated. So, the **Easy Readers** module begins with short vowels.



Easy Readers



⁸ Dehaene, S. (2010), *Reading in the Brain, the New Science of How we Read*, Penguin

⁹ Shanahan, T. (2005). *The National Reading Panel Report: Practical Advice for Teachers*, Learning Point Associates



The sequence is quite straightforward: the five main vowel sounds

a e i o u

followed by two revision lessons (which covers all five vowels).

The short vowel lessons begin with the short vowel “a”: **Bad Cat**.



This is a short (80 words in total) funny story - about a naughty cat. The voiceover takes children through the story. The text is highlighted. We see the naughty cat getting up to his mischief. The idea is to make the reading part of a rich experience – a story, pictures, animations, a voiceover – all in the service of having them notice how the short vowel “a” is used.

There is a lot of repetition. For instance, the first three screens are:

Dad was mad.

Dad was mad at Max the cat.

Max the cat was being bad.

The vocabulary is carefully controlled, and the teaching is embedded within a story format. Each picture provides visual cues, matched to the text.

This is phonics at work – but it is deliberately entertaining, to motivate and aid recall.

After children have worked with the individual vowels, they can look at the revision lessons, which combine all the vowels together.

Whole class lessons are a great idea, but children should feel encouraged to revisit the lessons independently. Depending on how the teacher organizes the program, home use is another great option.

Taken in conjunction with other teaching, the **Easy Readers** lessons on short vowels are an invaluable way of enriching children's introduction to the building blocks of language, and help set them on a happy path to reading.