# Debbie Hepplewhite's simple to complex Alphabetic Code overview

- <u>Slash marks</u> /ai/ mainly denote *single sound units* (**phonemes**). *Letters* and *letter combinations* (**graphemes**) appear in <u>single apostrophes</u> 'ay'.
- References to <u>short</u> vowel sounds relate to the sounds as in 'at, enter, in, on, up' denoted as: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/ and said in a 'staccato' manner - as opposed to references to the <u>long</u> vowel sounds commonly denoted as: /ai/, /ee/, /igh/, /oa/, /yoo/ as in 'aid, eel, night, oak, statue'.

Key to the 12 units of Debbie's international online synthetic phonics programme:

| units 1-5 | mainly simple code with options to extend | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 5th | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6-12 | /air/, /eer/, /zh/, split digraphs, complex code | 6th | 7th | 8th | 9th | 10th | 11th | 12th |

| simple code | complex code | | | | | | | teaching points |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| phonemes and key words | graphemes: spelling variations of the 44+ phonemes and key words | | | | | | | Debbie's programme introduces a simple code of at least one letter/s-sound correspondence for each of the 44+ sounds of speech of the English language. It then expands to teach further spellings and their pronunciation variations. |
| **/s/** <br> s snake | s <br> sun | -ss <br> glass | -ce <br> palace | -se <br> house | ce ci cy <br> cents   certain <br> city    circle <br> bicycle   lacy | sc <br> scent <br> scissors <br> scythe | -st- <br> castle <br><br> ps <br> pseudonym | *Short words ending with the /s/ sound with *short* medial vowel sounds usually end with double letters 'ss' - as in 'glass'. <br> *Sound out double consonants as one sound only. <br> *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound. <br> *Letters e, i or y alert the reader that the preceding 'c' will represent the /s/ sound. (This is 'soft c'.) |
| **/a/** <br> a apple | a <br> ant | | | | | | | *For 'a', teach "try the *short* vowel sound /a/ first, if that does not sound right then try the *long* vowel /ai/ sound". <br> *Some people pronounce the 'a' in some words as if it were /ar/: e.g. path p-*ar*-th; grass g-r-*ar*-s |
| **/t/** <br> t teddy | t <br> tent | -tt <br> letter | -ed <br> skipped | | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound. <br> *Past tense of verbs leads to 'ed' graphemes for /t/, /d/, /e+d/. |
| **/i/** <br> i insect | i <br> igloo | *-y <br> sunny | -y <br> cymbals | *-ey <br> monkey | *-ie <br> movie | | | *Letters 'i' and 'y' and the sounds they represent have very close links. Here the letter 'y' acts as a vowel-letter and vowel-sound. <br> * End graphemes 'y', 'ey' and 'ie' sound between /i/ and /ee/. |

| /p/<br>p pan | p<br>pen | -pp<br>puppet | | | | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound. |
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| /n/<br>n net | n<br>nuts | -nn<br>bonnet | kn<br>knot | gn<br>gnome | -ine<br>engine | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound.<br>*Some people would refer to 'silent k' or 'silent g'; others prefer to say that 'kn' and 'gn' are digraphs for /n/. |
| /k/<br>k kit | k<br>kitten | c<br>cat | -ck<br>duck | ch<br>chameleon | qu<br>bouquet | que<br>plaque | | | *Letter 'c' represents a /k/ sound when preceding the letters 'a', 'o' and 'u'.<br>*Short* words with *short* vowels usually end with 'ck' and this grapheme never begins words. |
| /e/<br>e egg | e<br>enter | ea<br>head | ai<br>said | | | | | | *When reading short unknown words with single letter 'e', teach "try the *short* vowel /e/ sound first, if that does not sound right then try the *long* vowel /ee/ sound". |
| /h/<br>h hat | h<br>hen | | | | | | | | *When letter names are taught, point out that the **name** for the letter 'h' is pronounced "aitch". |
| /r/<br>r rat | r<br>run | -rr<br>arrow | wr<br>write | rh<br>rhino | | | | | *Some people would refer to 'silent w' or 'silent h'; others prefer to say that 'wr' and 'rh' are digraphs (graphemes) representing the /r/ sound (phoneme). |
| /m/<br>m map | m<br>mop | -mm<br>hammer | -mb<br>thumb | -mn<br>columns | -me<br>welcome | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound.<br>*Some people would refer to 'silent b' or silent 'n'; others prefer to say that 'mb' and 'mn' are digraphs for /m/. |
| /d/<br>d dig | d<br>dog | -dd<br>puddle | -ed<br>rained | | | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound.<br>*Past tense of verbs leads to 'ed' graphemes for /t/, /d/, /e+d/. |
| /g/<br>g girl | g<br>goat | -gg<br>juggle | gu<br>guitar | gh<br>ghost | -gue<br>catalogue | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound.<br>*Letter 'u' in 'gu' acts as a block between the letters 'g' and 'i'. |

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| **/o/**<br>o orange | o<br>ostrich | wa<br>watch | qua<br>qualify | alt<br>salt | | | | *For 'o', teach "try the *short* vowel /o/ sound first, if that does not sound right then try the *long* vowel /oa/ sound".<br>*Alert the reader that the graphemes 'w' or 'qu' preceding a single letter 'a' can indicate that 'a' represents the /o/ sound. |
| **/u/**<br>u umbrella | u<br>under | o<br>son | -ou<br>touch | ough<br>thorough | | | | *For 'u', teach "try the *short* vowel /u/ sound first, if that does not sound right then try the *long* vowel /yoo/ sound".<br>*The letter 'u' is sometimes a long /oo/ sound: e.g. flu, judo, truth, Ruth, Pluto. |
| **/l/**<br>l ladder | l<br>leg | -ll<br>shell | | | | | | *To make the /l/ sound, roll up the tongue and say "ul".<br>*Short words with *short* vowels usually end with 'll' as in be**ll**.<br>*Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound. |
| **/ul/**schwa<br>le kettle | | -le<br>table | -il<br>pencil | -al<br>hospital | -el<br>camel | | | *Teach the 'schwa' effect involving /l/ through words such as: litt**le**, tab**le**, pup**il**, cymb**al**, lab**el** (pronounced close to "ul"). Teach that **literal sounding out when reading**, however, helps with spelling: e.g. h-o-s-p-i-t-**a**-l. |
| **/f/**<br>f feathers | f<br>fish | -ff<br>cliff | ph<br>photo | -gh<br>laugh | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound.<br>*Short words with *short* vowel sounds usually end with 'ff' as in o**ff** and cli**ff**. |
| **/b/**<br>b bat | b<br>ball | -bb<br>rabbit | bu<br>building | | | | | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound. |
| **/j/**<br>j jug | j<br>jam | -ge<br>cabbage | ge gi gy<br>gerbil giraffe gymnast | -dge<br>fridge | | | | *Letters e, i or y alert the reader that the preceding letter 'g' *might* represent the /j/ sound. (This is often referred to as 'soft g'.)<br>*Words *ending* with the /j/ sound are spelt with '**ge**' or '**dge**'. |
| **/y/**<br>y yawn | y<br>yak | | | | | | | *Teach early on that letter 'y' represents 3 sounds as in '**y**es, m**y** mumm**y**' and is often interchangeable with the phonemes /**i**/ and /**igh**/ - and the letter 'i'. |

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| **/ai/**<br>ai  aid | ai<br>aim | ay<br>tray | a<br>table | ae<br>sundae | a-e<br>cakes | -ey<br>prey | eigh<br>eight | -ea<br>break | *The 'a-i' as in 'baking' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ai/.<br>*Grapheme 'ea' for the /ai/ sound is rare - note the three common words in which it appears: **break**, **steak**, **great**. |
| **/w/**<br>w  web | w<br>wet | wh<br>wheel | | | | | | | *Letter 'w' preceding vowel graphemes should alert the reader to different possible pronunciations'; **(w)a** - wasp, wag; **(w)ar** - warm, wary; **(w)or** - work.   Note: 'wha*t*' |
| **/oa/**<br>oa  oak | oa<br>oats | ow<br>bow | o<br>yo-yo | oe<br>oboe | o-e<br>rope | ough<br>dough | eau<br>plateau | | *The 'o-i' as in 'poking' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /oa/. |
| **/igh/**<br>igh night | -igh<br>light | -ie<br>tie | i<br>behind | -y<br>shy | i-e<br>bike | ei<br>eider | | | *The 'i-i' as in 'liking' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /igh/. |
| **/ee/**<br>ee  eel | ee<br>bee | ea<br>eat | e<br>emu | * -y<br>sunny | e-e<br>concrete | -ey<br>key<br>*monkey | -ie<br>chief<br>*movie | -ine<br>sardines | *The 'e-i' as in 'competing' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ee/.<br>*The 'y' in 'sunny' is between the sound /i/ and /ee/. Similarly, so is 'ey' in 'monkey' and 'ie' in 'movie'. [Also in /i/ row.] |
| **/or/**<br>or  fork | or<br>horn | aw<br>dawn | au<br>sauce | al<br>chalk | oar<br>oars | oor<br>door | ore<br>snore | our<br>four | *Letter 'w' preceding grapheme 'ar' alerts the reader to pronounce /or/:  **(w)ar** - war, warn, wart, warder.<br>*Sound /w/ as in 'qu' [/k/+/w/] also alerts reader to pronounce 'ar' as /or/:  **(qu)ar** - quart, quarter, quartz, quartile. |
| **/z/**<br>z  zebra | z<br>zip | -zz<br>jazz | -s<br>fries | -se<br>cheese | -ze<br>breeze | | **/or/** | war<br>warm | *Double consonants alert the reader to sound out the preceding vowel with its *short* sound.<br>*Short words with *short* vowel sounds end with 'zz' - ja**zz**. |
| **/ng/**<br>ng  gong | -ng<br>ring | -n<br>jungle | | | | | ↓ | augh<br>caught | *The grapheme 'ng' can be pronounced differently according to regional accent and dependent upon the particular word.<br>*In some words, the 'n' and 'g' are pronounced separately |
| **/ngk/**<br>nk  ink | -nk<br>trunk | | | | | | quar<br>quarter | ough<br>thought | *Teach 'nk' as if it was *one sound unit* for reading and spelling purposes even though it is really two; that is: /ng/+/k/. Increasingly, this 'sound' may be denoted as /nk/. |

| /v/ v violin | v vet | -ve dove | | | | | | | *Teach that words ending with the /v/ sound always end with the grapheme 've'. |
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| /oo/ oo book | oo cook | oul should | | | | | | | *Teach the two sounds represented by the grapheme 'oo' at the same time; short /oo/, long /oo/. *Progress to linking the /oo/ as in 'moon' with the spelling and pronunciation variations of 'ew', 'ue' and 'u-e' - all of which can represent both the long /oo/ sound and the /yoo/ sound. |
| /oo/ oo moon | oo roof | -ue blue | u-e flute | -ew crew | -ui fruit | -ou soup | -o move | ough through | |
| /ks/ x fox | -x box | -ks books | -cks ducks | -kes cakes | | /gz/ x exam | | -x exact | *Teach the letter 'x' as if it was **one sound unit** /ks/ whereas it is really two sounds /k/+/s/. This is sometimes denoted as /x/. Provide word lists of '-x' words, '-ks', 'cks' and '-kes' words to compare: e.g. fox, boxes, looks, beaks, ducks, likes. |
| /ch/ ch chairs | ch chin | -tch patch | | | | /chu/ schwa ture picture | | -ture vulture | *Grapheme 'tch' indicates a preceding *short* vowel sound; e.g. witch, fetch, thatch, notch, hutch, watch. *Grapheme 'ch' follows *long* vowel sounds (bleach, pooch, reaches); but also some common words with *short* vowels which need to be noted: **rich, which, such, much, touch.** *Grapheme 'ch' follows consonants; e.g. mulch, wrench, pinch. |
| /sh/ sh sheep | sh shop | ch chef | -ti station | -ci magician | -ssi mission | | | | *Draw attention to 'ti', 'ci', 'ssi' graphemes in long words. *Provide words in groups with the same 'chunk' endings: -tion, -cian, -cial, -ssion, -cious. **Progress to the phoneme /zh/ as in 'television'. |
| /th/ th thistle | th bath | | | | | | | | *Teach unvoiced and voiced /th/ together. *Point out the difference with the sounds /f/ and /v/ and study mouth movements of these sounds carefully. Pronouncing /th/, /f/ and /v/ frequently causes confusion because of their similarities. |
| /th/ th there | th smooth | | | | | | | | |

| Sound | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Notes |
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| **/kw/**<br>qu queen | **qu**<br>quilt | | | | | | | | *In English, the letter 'q' is always followed by the letter 'u' and together they represent two sounds /k/+/w/. Treat as *one sound unit* /kw/ (usually denoted /**qu**/) for both reading and spelling purposes when teaching in the **early** stages. |
| **/ou/**<br>ou ouch | **ou**<br>shout | **ow**<br>owl | **ough**<br>plough | | | | | | *The *grapheme* 'ou' for the sound /ou/ is never found at the end of a word.<br>*'ough' is a rare grapheme as an /ou/ sound: bough, plough. |
| **/oi/**<br>ointment | **oi**<br>coin | **oy**<br>toy | | | | | | | *The *grapheme* 'oi' is never at the end of a word except in 'coi carp'. |
| **/yoo/**<br>ue statue | **-ue**<br>rescue | **u**<br>unicorn | **u-e**<br>tube | **ew**<br>new | **eu**<br>deuce | | | | *Point out that the graphemes 'ue', 'ew' and 'u-e' are also spellings for the long /oo/ sound.<br>*The 'u-i' as in 'amusing' alerts the reader to pronounce the long /ue/ (yoo). |
| **/er/**<br>mermaid | **er**<br>herbs | **ir**<br>birthday | **ur**<br>nurse | **ear**<br>earth | **wor**<br>world | schwa /er/<br>mix**er** | **-our**<br>humour | **-er**<br>theatre | *Letter 'w' preceding 'or' alerts the reader to say "wer…" as in: worm, work, worth.<br>*'er', 'our', 're' sound like a schwa /u/: sist**er**, col**our**, cent**re**. |
| **/ar/**<br>ar artist | **ar**<br>star | **alm**<br>palm | **alf**<br>half | **alv**<br>calves | **a**<br>father | | | | *Mention early on that some people pronounce some words with the 'a' grapheme as the /ar/ sound rather than the /a/ sound: path p-*ar*-th, glass g-l-*ar*-s. |
| **/air/**<br>air hair | **air**<br>stairs | **are**<br>hare | **ear**<br>bear | **ere**<br>where | | | | | *Teach /air/ along with phoneme /eer/ (below) as there are so many similar or identical graphemes representing /air/ and /eer/ phonemes.    Teach the word 'th**eir**' as 'their things'. |
| **/eer/**<br>eer deer | **eer**<br>cheer | **ear**<br>ears | **ere**<br>adhere | **ier**<br>cashier | | | | | See /air/ above. |
| **/zh/**<br>television | **-si**<br>vision | **-s**<br>treasure | **-z**<br>azure | **-g**<br>courgette | **-ge**<br>collage | note:<br><br>*-y, *-ey, *-ie are pronounced between /i/ and /ee/ when these graphemes are word-endings so they appear in both /i/ and /ee/ rows. | | | **Progress to this sound from lessons in the /sh/ sound and its spelling variations. There are no words with the grapheme 'zh' and the letters zh denote the phoneme only. |

# The complexities of the English Alphabetic Code include:

1.  one sound (phoneme) can be represented by one, two, three or four letters:  e.g. k,  sh,  ng,  igh, eigh

2.  one sound can be represented by different spellings (graphemes):  e.g. /oa/ is represented by: o,  oa,  ow,  oe,  o-e,  eau,  ough

3.  one spelling can represent multiple sounds:  e.g. 'ough':  /oa/ th**ough**, /or/ th**ough**t, /oo/ thr**ough**, /ou/ pl**ough**, /u/ thor**ough**

These complexities are taught explicitly and the Alphabetic Code is taught systematically with Debbie's international online synthetic phonics programme:

# General advice for teaching the Alphabetic Code:

*   Choose an **order of introduction** of letter/s-sound correspondences to create a version of a **simple code**. (See left-hand column for Debbie's version). Teach around 3 - 5 correspondences per week. Provide a **cumulative word bank** (for the simple code) for modelling **blending** all-through-the-word for reading, and **segmenting** all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling. The 'simple code', in effect, is part of the complex code but it is just a 'first step' of introducing the complexities of the English writing system for reading and spelling based on 44+ phonemes (smallest identifiable sounds of speech).

*   Keep the simple code revised and begin to introduce **spelling and pronunciation variations** of the complex code at a rate appropriate to the age and stage of the learner. With effective direct teaching, the rate of learning can be surprisingly fast-paced.

*   The Alphabetic Code is not an 'exact science' and **accents need to be taken into account** at all times along with the notion of 'tweaking pronunciations' when decoding to reach the regional or preferred pronunciation of the target word.

*   Tweaking pronunciations also helps to **raise awareness of the 'schwa effect'** (unstressed syllables) whereby in reality the sound /u/ is the spoken translation of the written code in words such as 'sof**a**' (sofu), 'fast**er**' (fastu), 'litt**le**' (littul), '**a**round' (uround). The reverse of this is the need to be aware of the spelling possibilities when segmenting spoken words for writing - particularly with regard to the schwa effect. The ability to spell accurately relies on a growing knowledge of **word associations** (noting words with the same spelling and sound variations) and this knowledge takes much longer to acquire than learning to decode well for reading. Always emphasise the **relationship between sounds and letters** when teaching spelling *rather than* relying on visual memory of letter order.