

Teaching Phonics to Beginners

There are many ways of teaching phonics, and any of those ways will be effective as long as the students have learned the most common combinations of sounds and are able to sound out words on their own without help.

Research has shown time and again the difference phonics make to students learning to read regardless of whether it is their first or second language. Many native English speakers struggle to read in the United States because of the misconception that they will just pick it up by reading. For many struggling readers, that unfortunately is not true. There are students who learn to read that way, but they are the exception, not the rule. By teaching students systematic phonics you are giving them a tool to sound out any words that they do not know or do not remember.

Many teachers struggle to teach phonics because that is not how they learned to read. It took me many years as a teacher to get my head around the importance of phonics and how to teach them. Hopefully, my experience will benefit you if you are struggling as I did.

There are two important points to be made about teaching phonics:

1. There are many words that don't follow phonics rules (come, could, you, the, they, said). They are irregular. Students just have to remember how these words are read. I usually have the students sound out these words using phonics rules as normal and then tell them that they are irregular.
2. I do not teach all of the possible phonics combinations, only the most common and useful. There are some combinations for which there are only one or two words. They are just not common enough to justify the time it takes to teach them and often only cause confusion. I just call them irregular (I say "Ding Dong Words" with my beginners) and move on.

Four Steps to Teaching Phonics

These are the basic steps to teaching phonics and goals for each step. When students have reached the goal for a particular step, they are ready to move up to the next step.

Step 1: The Alphabet

Goal: Students can recognize 40–60 letters a minute.

Students need to know their letters so well that they don't have to think. You should be able to show a student any letter of the alphabet and they should be able to say the name and sound in about a second.

Step 2: Short Vowel Words

Goal: Students can read 20–30 words a minute.

When the students know their alphabet letters really well, short-vowel reading isn't too difficult. Still, some students will struggle. They should be able to sound out the words one sound at a time and then put them together.

Step 3: Blends and Digraphs

Goal: Students can read 20–30 words a minute.

When you add blends (cl, br, ck) and digraphs (ch, sh) with the short-vowel words, students slow down a lot. The extra sounds are often difficult to put together and will take a lot of practice.

Step 4: Long Vowel Phonics

Goal: Students can read 30 words a minute.

Long vowel phonics (ai, ee, oa) are difficult. You tell students that each vowel can have more than one sound and they need a lot of practice differentiating the long and short vowel sounds, especially if they came from an Asian speaking country.