The ultimate guide to phonics rules and patterns

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https://www.themeasuredmom.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-phonics-rules-and-patterns/

I'm often asked about where someone might find a master list of **phonics rules** or a phonics rules cheat sheet.

I've put this post together so you have a place to find the most important phonics rules and patterns. Let's dive in!

Note: In this post, letters written between slash marks represent *sounds*. For example: /sh/ represents the sound you hear at the beginning of the word *chef*. Letters written between small brackets represent spellings. For example, <sh> and <ch> are both spellings for the sound /sh/.

> RULE/PATTERN #1: A vowel in every syllable

Every syllable includes a written and spoken vowel. Before we examine this rule further, we should define *vowel*.

In English, we have vowel **phonemes** and vowel **graphemes.** A vowel *phoneme* is an open speech sound that you can sing. We often think of two kinds of vowel sounds: "short" and "long." You can hear the five short vowel sounds in *cat, bed, pig, mop,* and *hut*. Long vowel sounds are the vowels' names, as in *rain*, *seek, light, coat,* and *cute.* However, there are more than just the "short" and "long" vowel sounds, as you'll soon see.

Vowel **graphemes** (written representations of the sounds) can occur as single letters (a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y) and in combination with other vowels and/or consonants.

Let's take a look at the vowel phonemes and the graphemes that can spell them.

"Short" vowel phonemes are usually spelled with a single vowel letter. They occur in words with the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern as well as in words that begin and/or end with consonant digraphs or blends.

Short vowels in CVC words: *cat, bed, pig, mop, hut*
Short vowels in CCVC words: *flat, shed, chip, stop, thud*
Short vowels in CVCC words: *hand, weld, wish, moth, bulk*
Short vowels in CCVCC words: *stand, swept, swish, stomp, blunt*

"Long" vowel phonemes occur in open syllables (that's coming soon) and in combination with other letters. While some **vowel teams** can spell a short vowel (such as <ea> in *bread*), most spell a long sound. **R-controlled vowels** are those in which the /r/ alters the sound of the vowel. I consider the following to be r-controlled vowel graphemes: <ar>, <or>, <er>, <ir>, and <ur>. Finally, there are **vowel diphthongs**, in which the vowel is two sounds glided into one. Diphthong graphemes are typically listed as <oi> and <oy>; <ou> and <ow> and sometimes <au> and <aw>.

Words with the VCE pattern: *cake, theme, like, stone, flute*
Words with long vowel teams: *say, paid, vein, weigh, break, veil, they, sweet, team, field, key, weird, fight, tie, soap, own, mould, toe, soon, stew, you, neutral, glue*
Words with r-controlled vowels: *farm, corn, herd, purse, bird*
Words with diphthongs: *boy, join, saw, sauce, cow, mouth*

> RULE/PATTERN #2: Closed syllables

There is disagreement among experts about whether there is such a thing as "six common syllable types" in English spelling. However, most will agree that English has both closed and open syllables.

A **closed** syllable is one in which the vowel is "closed off" by one or more consonants. In a closed syllable, the vowel sound is usually short. (In a multi-syllable word, a closed unaccented syllable often includes the schwa sound. The **schwa** is the most common vowel in English; it is pronounced as a lazy short i or u.)

Examples of closed syllables

As single words: *cat, milk, run, chest, thump*
As parts of longer words: *rab-bit, kit-ten, in-sect, bas-ket, pic-nic, ro-bot, lem-on, mu-sic, in-ci-dent*

> RULE/PATTERN #3: Open syllables

Unlike closed syllables, **open** syllables end with a vowel, not a consonant. The vowel typically spells its long sound; however, in an unaccented syllable, the vowel grapheme may represent the **schwa**, as in the middle syllable of *dinosaur*.

Examples of open syllables

As single words: *hi, me, she, go, no, shy*
As parts of longer words: *ro-bot, mu-sic, ro-de-o, di-no-saur*

> RULE/PATTERN #4: The FLOSS rule

The FLOSS rule tells us that when a one-syllable words ends in a short vowel and the letter f, l, s, or z, the final letter should be doubled.

The FLOSS rule

ff: *cuff, huff, off, puff, whiff*
ll: *bell, doll, yell, shell, will*
ss: *bass, chess, toss, pass*
zz: *buzz, fizz, fuzz, jazz*

Notes: Since *bus* and *gas* are shortened versions of longer words (*omnibus* and *gasoline*), they do not follow the rule. Exceptions to the rule include words like *yes, this, if,* and *pal.*

> RULE/PATTERN #5: Digraphs and blends are not equal

This is not a phonics rule, but a distinction I need to make because of the common confusion that I see.

A **digraph** is two letters that join together to represent a single sound. Consonant digraphs include <sh>, <ch>, <th>, <wh>, and <ph>.

A **consonant blend** (also called a **consonant cluster)** is 2-3 adjoining consonants that each retain their sound; however, the sounds are quickly blended together. Technically, a blend is *not* a grapheme because it is *2-3 graphemes* next to each other. The reason many programs teach blends is because it requires greater skill to read words with the CCVC or CVCC pattern than it does to read CVC words. I think it's important to spend extra time reading words with this pattern, but I do not think it's advisable to teach blends as units or to teach each one individually.

Consonant digraphs	Consonant blends (consonant clusters)
sh: *shed, wish*	**l-blends:** *flip, cloth, flop, glad, plan, slop*
ch: *chip, much*	**r-blends:** *brick, crab, dress, fresh, grid, prom, track*
th: *thin, bath*	**s-blends:** *scam, scrub, skip, smash, snack, spin, stack, strut, swim*
ph: *phone, graph*	**Other:** *twin, dwell*
wh: *when, which*	**Final blends:** *gulp, crisp, fact, kept, tusk, elk, golf, next, soft, fond, etc.*

> RULE/PATTERN #6: Spelling /k/ with <k> or <ck>

When the /k/ sound is at the end of the word, it can be spelled with <k> or <ck>. This is an important phonics rule that we want to teach students early on.

Use <k> after a long vowel: *leak, cake, soak, sleek, bike*
Use <k> after a short vowel and a consonant: *mask, silk*
Use <ck> immediately after a short vowel in a one-syllable word: *duck, rack, wreck, sock, stick*

> RULE/PATTERN #7: Reasons for the silent <e>

We often think of the final silent <e> as having only a single reason for its existence: to make the preceding vowel say its name, as in *lake*. But there are many reasons for the final silent <e>!

1. **Final silent <e> can make the preceding vowel say its name:** *cake, bike, joke, theme, flute*
2. **Final silent <e> can soften the sound of <c> or <g>:** *choice, barge*
3. **Final silent <e> occurs in a consonant-le syllable so that it has a printed vowel:** *sizzle, candle*
4. **Final silent <e> can give a consonant a voice:** *bath/bathe; cloth/clothe; breathe, cleanse*
5. **Final silent <e> can distinguish function from content words:** or/ore; be/bee; by/bye
6. **Final silent <e> can keep a word from ending in <v> or <u>:** *have, glue*
7. **Final silent <e> can make it clear that a word is not a plural:** *moose , tease*
8. **Sometimes, the final silent <e> is there for an unknown reason:** *done, come, where*

› RULE/PATTERN #8: Illegal letters

English words do not typically end with <i>, <j>, <q>, <u>, or <v.> Lyn Stone calls them "illegal" in her book, *Spelling for Life*. She also recommends this catchy chant: "<i>, <j>, <q>, <u>, <v> … at the end of a word they cannot be!"
This rule is important because it helps us explain many English spellings.

•Since <i> is illegal at the end of English words, we use <y> in words like *shy, by,* and *my*. We also use the <ie> spelling in words like *pie,* or *tie.* Exceptions to this rule include the words *I* and *hi,* as well as words from other languages such as *ski* (Norwegian) and *broccoli* (Italian).

•Since <j> is illegal at the end of English words, we use <ge> or <dge> as in *cage* or *judge*.

•Since <q> is illegal at the end of English words, we use <que> as in *unique.*

•Since <u> is illegal at the end of English words, we use <ue> as in *glue.* Exceptions include words like *flu* (an abbreviation for *influenza*) and *menu*, which comes from the French.

•Since <v> is illegal at the end of English words, we use <ve> as in *have, give,* and *carve.*

› RULE/PATTERN #9: Forming plurals

Rules for Plural Endings

Add <s> to most words: *cats, phones, lamps, doors, houses*
Add <es> to words that end with s, x, ch, sh, or z: *dresses, foxes, patches, brushes, buzzes*
If a word ends with a consonant+y, change the <y> to <i> and add <es>: *flies, cherries*
If a word ends with <f> or <fe>, sometimes change the <f> to <v> before adding <s> or <es>: *lives, wolves, knives*
Some nouns have irregular plurals: *man/men; sheep/sheep; woman/women; tooth/teeth, etc.*

› RULE/PATTERN #10: Forming past tense

For most English words, we form past tense verbs using the <ed> ending. The <ed> is called a **morpheme**, because it is a unit of meaning. The <ed> spelling communicates that a word is past tense. It is important to teach this so that students understand that a word like *jumped* is not spelled *jumpt*.

The <ed> ending can be pronounced in three different ways: /t/ as in *jumped*, /d/ as in *played*, and /id/ as in *landed.* The pronunciation depends on the consonant that precedes the ending. The important thing for our students to remember is that *the spelling of the morpheme remains consistent, even when pronunciation changes.*

> RULE/PATTERN #11: The doubling rule

This is an important rule to teach our students as soon as they learn to write words with **inflectional suffixes** such as <ed>, <ing>, and <er>. All of these are examples of vowel suffixes because they begin with a vowel.

The Doubling Rule (Also called the 1-1-1 Rule)

Double the final consonant before adding a vowel suffix if the base word has ONE syllable, ONE short vowel, and ONE consonant at the end. (Examples: *sit -> sitting, shop -> shopper, flip -> flipped)*

> RULE/PATTERN #12: The e-drop rule

Drop the final silent <e> when adding a vowel suffix (a suffix that begins with a vowel).
Examples:
live + ing -> living
serve + er -> server
bake + ed -> baked

Nonexamples (because these are not vowel suffixes)
hope + ful -> hopeful
like + ness -> likeness

Keep the final silent <e> if it is needed to preserve the soft sound of <c> or <g>.
Examples:
change + able -> changeable
notice + able -> noticeable
outrage + ous -> outrageous

> RULE/PATTERN #13: Changing the <y> to <i>

When a word ends with a consonant + <y>, change the <y> to <i> before adding a vowel suffix.
Examples:
cry + es -> cries
hurry + ed -> hurried
identify + er -> identifier

> RULE/PATTERN #14: Spelling /ch/ with <ch> or <tch>

When a word ends with a single short vowel and /ch/, spell /ch/ with <tch>.
Examples: *batch, wretch, stitch, notch, hutch*
Exceptions: *much, such, rich, which*

This rule typically applies to one-syllable words, but it sometimes appears within a short vowel syllable of a longer word.
Examples: *satchel, kitchen*

> RULE/PATTERN #15: The Q rule

"Q and u stick like glue." In other words, The letter <q> may not stand alone in English spelling. Except for names and other proper nouns, the <q> must always be followed by a <u> and a vowel.
It's important to note that in words with <qu>, the <u> is usually acting as a consonant, since it represents the /w/ sound (of course, this isn't true in words like *plaque* and *unique)*.
Examples: *quit, quaint, quest, queen, quiet*

> RULE/PATTERN #16: Spelling /j/ with <j>, <g>, or <dge>

Spelling with <j>, <ge>, and <dge>

Never use <j> at the end of English words.
Use <ge> in a VCE pattern *(cage, huge)* **or to preserve the /j/ sound** *(range, arrange).*
Use <dge> immediately after a short vowel in a single syllable word *(badge, hedge, dodge).*
Occasionally use <dge> after a short vowel in a longer word *(knowledge, curmudgeon).*

> RULE/PATTERN #17: Soft and hard c & g

The letter <c> spells its soft sound, /s/, when it immediately precedes <e>, <i>, or <y>.
Examples: *cent, city, cyst, icy, agency*
The letter <c> spells its hard sound when it immediately precedes the letters <a>, <o>, or <u>.
Examples: *car, container, curb*

One reason these rules are important is because they affect the spelling of a word when you add a vowel suffix. For the word *serviceable,* for example, we might wonder why the final silent <e> is not dropped when adding the vowel suffix <able>. The reason the <e> is not dropped is because it is *needed* to keep the sound of the <c> soft.

Sometimes we need to keep the sound of final <c> hard. Consider the word *panic*. If we add the vowel suffix <ing>, the word would be *panicing.* This makes it look like the <c> should spell its soft sound, because it is followed by an <i>. To preserve the hard sound, we need to add a <k>: *panicking.* Other words like this inlcude *picnicking, colicky, and frolicked.*

Hopefully the conclusion that you are drawing is that English language is not illogical; it's complex.

The letter <g> *may* spell its soft sound, /j/, before <e>, <i>, or <y>.
Examples: *germ, ginger, gym*

The <g> spells its hard sound, /g/, before <a>, <o>, or <u>.
Examples: *gasoline, goat, gumbo, begun, cardigan*

Sometimes the <g> spells its hard sound, /g/, before the letters <e> or <i>.
Examples: *get, gear, target, forget, girl, gift, begin*

> RULE/PATTERN #18: Vowel team position matters

It's true that there are multiple spellings for different sounds. For example, two common spellings for long a are <ai> and <ay>. Thankfully, for many of these sounds, it's not hard to know which grapheme to use when we consider the vowel team's position in the word:

Beginning or middle of a word:
<ai>: *aid, train*
<oa>: *oatmeal, soak (Exception: cocoa)*
<oi>: *oil, poison*
<au>: autumn, haul

End of a word:
<ay>: *stay* (or in compound words, such as *daylight)*
<ow>: *snow* (sometimes used at the beginning or middle when followed by <l> or <n> as in *bowl* or *own)*
<oy>: *boy, employ* (may be used at the end of a syllable, as in *oyster or loyal)*
<aw>: *saw, straw,* (may also be used before <n>, <l> and <k> as in *dawn, crawl, hawk)*

> RULE/PATTERN #19: The letter <y>

The letter <y> can represent a vowel or consonant sound, depending on its position in a word. Did you know that the letter <y> spells a vowel sound more often than it spells a consonant sound?

Think of <y> as a stand-in for the letters <e> and <i>. There is usually a logical reason that we use <y> instead of these vowels.

In the word *crazy*, for example, we can't use an <e> to spell the long e sound because the word would be *craze*, and the VCE pattern tells us that the <e> would be silent. The letter <y> jumps in as a stand-in. (Or, as Lyn Stone writes in *Spelling for Life*, a stunt double.)

Also consider the word *fly*. We don't write it as *fli* because <i> is illegal at the end of English words. So the letter <y> becomes a stand-in.

> RULE/PATTERN #20: Retain the spelling of the morpheme

With this rule we are crossing over into morphology, but both phonology and morphology affect English spelling, so trust me – this is relevant.

Consider the words *military* and *militia*. Why isn't the /sh/ in *militia* spelled with <sh>? It's because these words share the base *milit*. The spelling of that morpheme stays the same, even when the pronunciation changes.

I could give you an infinite number of examples, but let's keep it short:

- *Nature* and *native*
- *Malign* and *malignant*
- *Signed* and *signature*

› RULE/PATTERN #21: Not every grapheme spells a phoneme

I am a big fan of sound mapping, in which we map sounds to letters by spelling each phoneme on a single line or in a single box. However, sound mapping can get tricky when we try to assign *every* grapheme to a phoneme. Some graphemes aren't spelling any sound at all.

For example, in the word *two*, the <w> is not helping to spell /t/ or /oo/. It's used to connect this word to other words with a similar meaning (*twice, twin, twelve*).

Another example is the word *ladder*. Technically, only the first <d> is spelling /d/. The second <d> is there to keep the vowel short.

What about the word *since?* The final <e> is not part of the /s/ pronunciation. It is there to keep the sound of the <c> soft.

I could go on forever, but let's conclude with the word *have*. The final <e> is not helping spell /v/. It's there to keep the word from ending with the illegal letter <v>.

This final rule does get hairy. For example, I consider <ue> a spelling for long u, even though you could argue that the <e> is there to keep the word from ending in illegal <u>. Different phonics experts and programs have different opinions about which letter combinations are graphemes and which are not. But I encourage you to think about this rule the next time you are confronted with a puzzling spelling. Could there be a logical reason for the intrusive letter?

› Conclusion

I've worked to make this post as comprehensive as possible – but I could never list all the rules and patterns in a single blog post! I encourage you to check out these references for more insight.

› References

The Complete Guide to English Spelling Rules, by John J. Fulford
Spelling for Life, by Lyn Stone
Uncovering the Logic of English, by Denise Eide

More resources for you

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