












The 44 Sounds (Phonemes) of English









A **phoneme** is a speech sound. It's the smallest unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another. Since sounds cannot be written, we use letters to represent or stand for the sounds. A **grapheme** is the written representation (a letter or cluster of letters) of one sound. It is generally agreed that there are approximately 44 sounds in English, with some variation dependent on accent and articulation. The 44 English phonemes are represented by the 26 letters of the alphabet individually and in combination.

Phonics instruction involves teaching the relationship between sounds and the letters used to represent them. There are hundreds of spelling alternatives that can be used to represent the 44 English phonemes. Only the most common sound / letter relationships need to be taught explicitly.






The 44 English sounds can be divided into two major categories – consonants and vowels. A **consonant** sound is one in which the air flow is cut off, either partially or completely, when the sound is produced. In contrast, a **vowel** sound is one in which the air flow is unobstructed when the sound is made. The vowel sounds are the music, or movement, of our language. The 44 phonemes represented below are in line with the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Consonants







Sound	Common spelling	Spelling alternatives					
/b/	b ball		bb ribbon				
/d/	d dog		dd add	ed filled			
/f/	f fan		ff cliff	ph phone	gh laugh	lf calf	ft often
/g/	g grapes		gg egg	gh ghost	gu guest	gue catalogue	
/h/	h hat		wh who				
/j/	j jellyfish		ge cage	g giraffe	dge edge	di soldier	gg exaggerat e
/k/	k kite		c cat	ch christmas	cc acclaim	lk folk	qu bouquet
			q(u) queen	ck back	X box		
/l/	l leaf		ll spell				
/m/	m monkey		mm summer	mb climb	mn autumn	lm palm	
/n/	n nest		nn funny	kn knight	gn gnat	pn pneumonia	
/ng/	ng ring		n sink	ngue tongue			

/p/	p pig		pp happy				
/r/	r robot		rr carrot	wr wrong	rh rhyme		
/s/	s sun		ss mess	c circus	sc science	ps psychology	st listen
			ce rice	se horse			
/t/	t tap		tt batter	th thomas	ed tapped		
/v/	v van		f of	ph stephen	ve five		
/w/	w web		wh why	u quick	o choir		
/y/	y yo-yo		i opinion	j hallelujah			
/z/	z zebra		zz buzz	s has	ss scissors	x xylophone	ze maze
			se cheese				







Digraphs




Sound	Common spelling	Spelling alternatives					
/zh/	s treasure		si division	z azure			
/ch/	ch cheese		tch watch	tu future	ti question	te righteous	
/sh/	sh shark		ce ocean	s sure	ci special	si tension	ch machine
			sci conscience	ti station			
/th/ (unvoiced)	th thongs						
/th/ (voiced)	th feather						

Short vowels


Sound	Common spelling	Spelling alternatives					
/a/	a cat		ai plaid				
/e/	e egg		ea bread	u bury	ie friend	ai said	a many
			eo leopard	ei heifer	ae aesthetic	ay say	
/i/	i igloo		e england	o women	u busy	ui build	y hymn
			ie sieve				
/o/	o orange		a swan	ho honest			
/u/	u mug		o monkey	oo flood	ou trouble		
/oo/	oo book		u bush	ou could	o wolf		

Long vowels

/ā/	ai snail		a baby	eigh weigh	aigh straight	ay hay	et croquet
			ei vein	au gauge	a-e cake	ea break	ey they
/ē/	ee bee		e me	ea seat	y lady	ey key	oe phoenix
			ie brief	i ski	ei receive	eo people	ay quay
/ī/	i spider		y fly	igh night	ie pie	uy buy	ye rye
			ai aisle	is island	eigh height	i-e kite	
/ō/	oa boat		o-e bone	o open	oe toe	ow low	ough though
			eau beau	oo brooch	ew sew		
/ü/	oo moon		ew screw	ue blue	u-e flute	oe shoe	ough through
			ui fruit	o who	oeu manoeuvre	ou croup	
/y//ü/ (2 sounds)	u uniform		you you	ew few	iew view	yu yule	eue queue
			eau beauty	ieu adieu	eu feud		

/oi/	oi coin		oy boy	uoy buoy			
/ow/	ow cow		ou shout	ough bough			
/ə/ (Schwa sound)	er ladder		ar dollar	our honour	or doctor	i dolphins	e tickets
			u cactus	ur augur	re centre	eur chauffeur	

'R' controlled vowels

/ā/	air chair		are square	ear pear	ere where	eir their	ayer prayer
/ā/	ar car		a bath	au laugh	er sergeant	ear heart	
/û/	ir bird		er term	ur burn	ear pearl	or word	our journey
			yr myrtle				
/ô/	aw paw		a ball	or fork	oor door	ore more	oar board
			our four	ough taught	ar war	ough bought	au sauce
/ēə/	ear ear		eer steer	ere here	ier pier		
/üə/	ure cure		our tourist				

Tricky Graphemes

There are some letters that are used to write down sounds already represented by other graphemes. For example we use the letter c to represent the /k/ sound (already represented by the grapheme 'k') and the /s/ sound (already represented by the grapheme 's').

Letter		
c	/k/ as in cat, cot, cup	/s/ as in city, cycle, cents
x	/k//s/ as in box, fox, fix	/g//z/ as in example, exam
q(u)*	/k//w/ as in queen	/k/ as in bouquet, marquis, cheque

* the q is always paired with the letter u.

