

English Spelling Pattern Generalizations

1. Do not make *rules/generalizations* the emphasis of phonics instruction.
2. Teach rules/generalizations with the most utility.
3. Emphasize applying the rules/generalizations, in addition to verbalizing them.
4. Teach the rules/generalizations when children can best understand and apply them.
5. Never teach rules as absolutes.

Adapted from Blevins, 2006

Short Vowels						
Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Generalizations
			B	M	E	
/ă/	a	97%	X	X		add, cat, spasm
/ĕ/	e	91%	X	X		bed, edge, indelible
	ea	4%		X		head, deaf, tear, threat, instead, dreadful
/ĭ/	i	92%	X	X		if, big, still, frigid
/ŏ/	o	94%	X	X		odd, fox, toggle
/ŭ/	u	86%	X	X		up, cut, combustion

Consonants

Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/b/	b	97%	X		X	bat, bread, jab, carbohydrate	
/k/	c	73%	X			cat, crab, cotton, cut, biscuit	When <i>c</i> comes before <i>a</i> , <i>o</i> , <i>u</i> , or a consonant, it makes the "hard" /k/ sound.
	__ck	6%			X	stick, track, locket	Used at the end of a word or syllable with an accented, short vowel spelled with a single letter directly before it.
	k	13%	X		X	ketchup, kill, Kyle, Kyoto, bark, take, sneak	/k/ is spelled <i>k</i> before <i>e</i> , <i>i</i> , or <i>y</i> , or after a consonant, long vowel, or vowel combination.
	ch	3%	X		X	school, chord, anchor, character, chrome	<i>Ch</i> can stand for the single consonant sound /k/ in words derived from the Greek language. <i>Ch</i> before another consonant is usually pronounced /k/.
	__que				X	unique, oblique	Used in rare cases at the end of words, usually words of French origin, to make the /k/ sound.
/d/	d	98%	X		X	dog, drip, led, friend, hard	
	__ed				X	roamed, cried, rented, ended	<i>ed</i> is an inflectional ending that indicates past tense. When a base word ends in a voiced sound, the past tense is voiced /d/. However, when a base word ends in /t/ or /d/, the past tense is the syllable /ed/.
/f/	f	78%	X		X	food, flat, golf, sniff, defend	The letter <i>f</i> is almost always doubled when it comes at the end of a one-syllable word and is preceded by one short vowel (FLOSS rule).
	ph	12%	X		X	physician, graph	<i>ph</i> is a consonant digraph in which the two letters produce one sound, /f/; it used in words of Greek origin.
	__gh				X	laugh, tough	<i>gh</i> makes the /f/ sound at the end of a few words.
	__lf				X	half, calf	This spelling is used in rare cases at the ends of words after the /Ä/ sound spelled <i>a</i> .
/g/ (hard g)	g	88%	X		X	game, gone, gulf, get, giddy, tag, tugboat	The spelling <i>g</i> followed by <i>a</i> , <i>o</i> , or <i>u</i> makes the hard /g/ sound. When followed by <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> , it sometimes makes the /g/ sound and sometimes the /j/ sound.
	gh__		X			ghost, ghoul	This spelling is used in rare cases at the beginning of words.
/h/ (aspirated)	h__	98%	X			hound, horseback, dehydrate	<i>h</i> must be followed by another letter, usually a vowel, to make the aspirated sound /h/.

Consonants (cont.)

Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/j/	j	22%	X			judge, injury	English words do not end with a <i>j</i> .
	__dge	5%			X	badge, dodge, ridge	<i>dge</i> makes the /j/ sound at the ends of words or syllables if there is a single, accented, short vowel directly before it.
	ge	66%	X		X	sponge, cage, village, gent, agent, gem	<i>ge</i> makes the soft- <i>g</i> sound /j/ at the end of words after a consonant, after a long vowel sound, and after an unaccented schwa. The <i>ge</i> spelling can also come at the beginning of a word or syllable.
	gi__		X			giraffe, giant	The spelling <i>gi</i> can make the soft- <i>g</i> sound /j/ when followed by another letter.
	g(y)		X		X	gym, edgy, spongy	The spelling <i>gy</i> at the end of a word makes the soft- <i>g</i> sound /j/.
/l/	l	91%	X		X	loop, lion, elephant, dental, pull, will	The letter <i>l</i> is almost always doubled when it comes at the end of a one-syllable word and is preceded by one short vowel (FLOSS rule).
/m/	m	94%	X		X	mad, stream, pump	
	mb				X	lamb, bomb, crumb	This spelling is used in rare cases at end of words.
	mn				X	autumn	This spelling is used in rare cases at end of words.
/n/	n	97%	X		X	no, nest, hinder, pan, craftsman	
	kn__	< 1%	X			know, knight	<i>kn</i> must be followed by a letter, usually a vowel, and cannot come at the end of a word or syllable.
	gn__		X			gnaw, gnu	This spelling is used in rare cases at beginning of words. It is usually followed by a vowel.
/p/	p	96%	X		X	popcorn, flap, stripe	
/kw/	qu__	97%	X			quiet, quick	<i>q</i> is never written without a <i>u</i> following it. The <i>qu</i> spelling must be followed by another letter in order to make the /kw/ sound.
/r/	r	97%	X		X	rob, rabbit, car, startle	
	wr__		X			wren, wrestle, wrap	<i>wr</i> must be followed by a letter, usually a vowel, and may not come at the end of a word.

Consonants (cont.)

Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/s/	s	73%	X		X	sign, sit, master, loss	The letter s is almost always doubled when it comes at the end of a one-syllable word and is preceded by one short vowel (FLOSS rule).
	ce	17%	X		X	center, bounce	The c in ce makes the soft-c sound /s/.
	ci__		X			city, citrus	The c in ci makes the soft-c sound /s/. ci must be followed by another letter.
	c(y)		X		X	cyclone, juicy	The c in c(y) makes the soft-c /s/ sound.
	sc__		X			scythe, scent	This spelling is used in rare cases at the beginning of words.
	ps__		X			psychology, psycho	This spelling is used in rare cases at the beginning of words, usually words of Greek origin.
/t/	t	97%	X		X	time, statistic, hint	
	__ed				X	barked, hissed	ed is an inflectional ending that indicate past tense. When a base word ends in a voiceless sound, the past tense is the voiceless /t/.
/v/	v	99.50%	X		X	vase, have	
/w/	w__	92%	X			will, want, sideways	w must be followed by a letter, usually a vowel, in order to make the /w/ sound.
/ks/ (also /gz/)	__x	90%			X	box, axe	x must be preceded by a short vowel sound to make the /ks/ sound.
/y/	y__	44%	X			yellow, backyard, yoyo	y must be followed by a letter, usually a vowel, to make the /y/ sound.
	i	55%	X			onion, opinion	
/z/	z	23%	X		X	zipper, ozone, buzz, fizz	The spelling z is usually used at the beginning of words. It is usually doubled at the end of words.
	__s	64%			X	as, was, his, glows	

Long Vowels							
Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/Ā/	a	45%	X	X		alligator, able	[Long a]
	a_e	35%	X	X		grate, snake, ate	The long-a sound spelled a_e must be followed by a consonant sound.
	ai_	9%	X	X		ail, bait	The long-a sound spelled ai_ must be followed by a consonant sound.
	_ay	6%			X	stay, gray, daybreak	The long-a sound spelled ay must be preceded by a consonant sound. It is the most common spelling for /ā/ at the end of words.
	ea			X		steak, break	The spelling ea can be pronounced three ways. Think of the sentence, "Eat a great breakfast," to remember the ways it can be pronounced.
/Ē/	e	40%	X		X	even, be, relief	[Long e]
	e_e		X	X		evening, secede, mere	The long-e sound spelled e_e must be followed by a consonant sound.
	ee	6%	X	X	X	eel, heel, tee	
	ea	6%	X	X	X	east, wheat, tea	The spelling ea can be pronounced three ways. Think of the sentence, "Eat a great breakfast," to remember the ways it can be pronounced.
	_y	41%			X	nearly, heavy	When y follows a consonant at the end of a word with more than one syllable, it makes the /Ē/ sound, unless the accent is on the last syllable. When used before another vowel, y makes the /ē/ sound (e.g., <i>embryo</i>).
	ie			X		field, unyielding	The long-e sound spelled ie must be preceded and followed by consonants.
	i			X		abbreviate, obedient, bacterial, unique	The vowel i is pronounced /Ē/ when followed by a different vowel sound in a suffix. When i is before <i>que</i> or <i>gue</i> , it is pronounced /ē/ because they are French spellings borrowed by English.
/Ī/	i	37%	X			idle, identity, iconic	[Long i]
	i_e	37%	X	X		ice, dime	This spelling must be followed by a consonant sound. It cannot be used at the end of a syllable.
	igh			X	X	slight, sigh	
	_y	14%			X	my, sty, fry, apply	/Ī/ is spelled y at the end of one-syllable words. When y comes at the end of a two-syllable word and the accent is on the last syllable, it makes the sound /ī/.
	_ie				X	lie, pie, necktie	The long-i sound spelled ie must be preceded by a consonant.

Long Vowels (cont.)

Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/ō/	o__e	14%	X		X	ode, rope, atone	The long-o sound spelled o_e must be followed by a consonant sound.
	__oe				X	doe, floe	The long-o sound spelled oe must be preceded by a consonant.
	__ow	5%		X	X	bowl, crow, stow, flown	ow is sometimes pronounced /ō/ when followed by l or n.
	oa__	5%	X	X		oat, groan	The long-o sound spelled oa must be followed by a consonant to make the /ō/ sound.
/ū/	u	69%	X	X		pupil, student	[Long u] These spellings represent /ū/ pronounced /yōō/.
	u__e	21%	X	X		abused, mute	
	__ew	3%		X	X	newt, few	
	__ue				X	due	

Diphthongs and Digraphs

Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/ch/	ch	55%	X		X	chip, punch, beach	ch is used at the beginning of words (e.g., <i>chip</i>), after a consonant (e.g., <i>punch</i>), and after a vowel pair (e.g., <i>beach</i>).
	t__	31%	X			feature, denture	t is used in some final stable syllables.
	__tch	11%			X	stitch, stretch, latch	tch is used at the end of a word or syllable if there is a single short vowel directly before it.
/th/	th	100%	X		X	that, thin, bath, bathe	The spelling th represents two sounds: voiced (e.g., <i>this</i>) and unvoiced (e.g., <i>thin</i>).
/sh/	ti	53%	X			action, motion	When the letter i follows c, s, ss, sc, or t in the last part of a word, it is usually silent and indicates that these graphemes make the /sh/ sound.
	sh	26%	X		X	ship, dish	
	ch		X			chef, chic, brochure, chandelier	Words influenced by French use the ch spelling for /sh/.

Diphthongs and Digraphs (cont.)

Phoneme	Common spelling	Frequency of spelling	Placement			Sample words	Generalizations
			B	M	E		
/zh/	su__		X			treasure, leisure	When the letter <i>s</i> is followed by <i>y</i> , <i>i</i> , or <i>u</i> in the middle of a word, it may be pronounced /zh/ or /sh/. Try /zh/ first.
	si__	49%	X			fusion, vision	
/ng/	__ng	59%			X	singing, wrong	This spelling always follows a short vowel.
	n	41%		X	X	monkey, junk	
/hw/	wh__	100%	X			where, whiz, whipped	The sound /hw/ spelled <i>wh</i> has an aspirated <i>h</i> sound at the beginning. When <i>wh</i> comes before the letter <i>o</i> , only the /h/ is pronounced (e.g., <i>whole</i>).
/ar/	ar	89%	X	X	X	art, bark, star, tar	When <i>ar</i> follows a <i>w</i> , it makes the sound /or/ (e.g., <i>war</i> , <i>warm</i> , <i>wart</i>).
/er/	er	77%	X	X	X	ergonomically, stern, number	<i>er</i> is the most popular spelling of all the <i>r</i> -controlled vowels.
	ir		X	X	X	irk, bird, fir	<i>ir</i> can make the /ear/ sound when another <i>r</i> follows it (e.g., <i>irrigate</i>) or when a vowel other than <i>e</i> immediately follows it (e.g., <i>iridescence</i>).
	ur		X	X	X	urgent, gurgle, fur	
/or/	or	97%	X	X	X	organ, fork, lore, for	When <i>or</i> follows <i>w</i> , it makes the sound /er/ (e.g., <i>worm</i> , <i>word</i> , <i>work</i>).
/oy/	oi	62%	X	X		oil, devoid	The vowel diphthong /oi/ spelled <i>oi</i> is usually used in the initial and medial positions of words.
	__oy	32%			X	boy, employ	The vowel diphthong /oi/ spelled <i>oy</i> is usually used in the final position of words. The sound /oi/ spelled <i>oy</i> must be preceded by a consonant.
/öö/	oo	35%		X		book, foot, wood	Think of the word <i>footstool</i> to remember both sounds for <i>oo</i> .
	u	61%		X		put, bull	
/oo/	oo	38%	X	X	X	oops, spool, drool, cool, boo	Think of the word <i>footstool</i> to remember both sounds for <i>oo</i> . These spellings represent /oo/ pronounced /ÖÖ/, not /yoo/. The sound /oo/ spelled <i>u_e</i> must be followed by a consonant. The spellings <i>ew</i> and <i>ue</i> must be preceded by consonants to make the /oo/ sound.
	u__e	8%		X		flute, dude	
	u	21%		X	X	truth, flu	
	__ew			X	X	brew, steward	
	__ue				X	glue, undue	
/aw/	aw		X	X	X	saw, guffaw, fawn, crawl	<i>aw</i> makes the /aw/ sound at the end of a base word and when followed by a final <i>n</i> or <i>l</i> at the end of a base word.
	au__		X	X		augment, audit, fraud	<i>au</i> makes the /aw/ sound at the beginning or in the middle of a word. <i>au</i> makes the /aw/ sound when followed by an <i>n</i> or <i>l</i> anywhere in a word.
/ou/	ow	29%	X	X	X	owl, crown, bow (of a boat), tower	The vowel diphthong /ow/ spelled <i>ow</i> usually comes in the final position of words but at times is followed by <i>l</i> , <i>n</i> , or <i>er</i> .
	ou__	56%	X	X		out, about, ground	The vowel diphthong /ow/ spelled <i>ou</i> is the most frequent medial spelling for /ou/.

Resources

Blevins, W. (2006). *Phonics from A to Z: A practical guide*. New York, NY: Scholastic Teaching Resources.

Moats, L. (2004). *Speech to print: Language essentials for teachers*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Moats, L. (2009). *Spellography for teachers: How English spelling works* (2nd ed., Vol. 3). Boston, MA: Sopris West.