



Teaching phonics in writing

What is the relationship between phonics and writing?

Learning to write is a complex process. It requires young writers to draw on their knowledge of a range of skills and strategies as they create texts. One of the crucial skills in writing is to understand the spelling system of the language. Spelling is a social practice and contributes to the making of meaning in written texts. English spelling is influenced by four interrelated key elements – phonology, orthography, morphology and etymology (Adoniou, 2022; Moats, 2019). For more detail on the key elements see [Spelling](#).

This paper relates to the following Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Standard 1:

Know students and how they learn

- 1.2 Understand how students learn
- 1.5 Differentiated teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities

Standard 2:

Know the content and how to teach it

- 2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area
- 2.3 Curriculum, assessment and reporting
- 2.5 Literacy and numeracy strategies
- 2.6 Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Standard 3:

Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning

- 3.3 Use teaching strategies

Standard 4:

Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments

- 4.1 Support student participation

Standard 5:

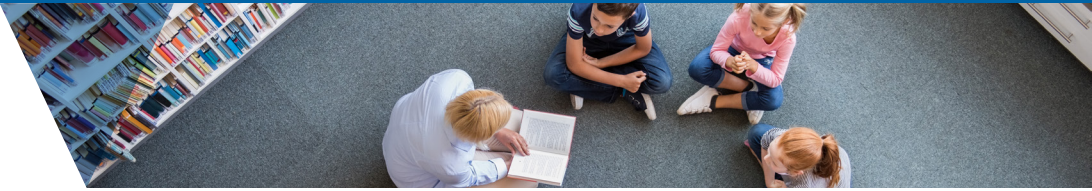
Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning

- 5.1 Assess student learning
- 5.4 Interpret student data



- **Phonology** refers to knowledge about the sounds (phonemes) of the language and how to manipulate the sounds.
- **Orthography** involves knowing the letters or groups of letters – graphemes, for example, digraphs and trigraphs that are used to represent these sounds in their written form.
- **Morphology** is the understanding of the parts of words that carry meaning.
- **Etymology** is the history and origin of words, and along with morphology, provides context about how the phonology and orthography of the English language work.

In their first attempts to write down or spell words, young writers begin to represent the sounds they hear in spoken words with known letters or symbols. This relationship between the sounds and the ways they are represented as letters or letter clusters is known as grapho-phonics knowledge or [phonics](#). Although the use of phonic knowledge may be dominant in beginning writers, they can also draw on morphological knowledge as they build a repertoire of strategies to help them spell words (Daffern & Critten, 2019). While phonology and orthography are only two components of the spelling system, using phonic knowledge is a learned skill which provides a strong foundation for writing. Significant time should be dedicated to its teaching in the early years.



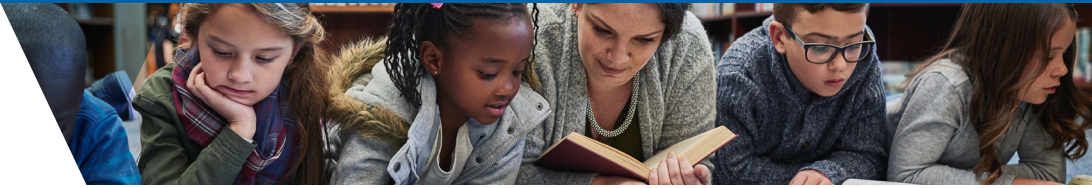
Why is teaching phonics in writing important?

Teaching phonics is an important part of a rich literacy program, in both reading and writing. In recent years, there has been a growing body of research evidence on the important role phonics plays in learning to read (Castles, Ration & Nation, 2018; Konza, 2016). When reading, students learn and use their knowledge of phonics to blend or synthesise phonemes or parts of words (morphemes or syllables) efficiently and automatically. Readers learn to quickly identify and blend sounds together as they say the words aloud.

Writing whole texts also provides a meaningful context in which students can learn and use phonic knowledge. In the early years, teachers can use writing opportunities to prompt students to use the 'sounding out' strategy to spell unknown words. In this strategy language is slowed down as teachers suggest that students 'stretch out words', identify the sound units in the words and assign letters to them in writing (encoding). Phonemic awareness is also important here as young writers learn to segment words into their constituent phonemes in order to spell. See more detail [here](#) for morphemic knowledge and etymological knowledge.

Research also indicates that the phonic knowledge developed in writing as students learn to spell can also support reading development. An emphasis on spelling helps students to make the connections between letters and their corresponding sounds (Ehri, 2020) and store familiar word spellings in their memory. This, in turn improves their word recognition and retention for reading (Ehri, 2022). The teaching of phonics serves to strengthen the learning of both reading and writing and, inversely, reading and writing help to support the learning of phonics.

Handwriting is also an essential component of writing. It draws on the integration of orthographic and motor skills. There is some literature (Labat et al. 2015) to suggest that the act of handwriting can promote the learning of letter knowledge, phonics and spelling. When young writers are relating sounds to the letter or letters which represent them, this can serve as a cue for retrieving the visual or motor skills needed for producing a letter or letters in writing (Alves et al., 2018). Handwriting can help to consolidate letter knowledge needed for both writing and reading.



How can the teaching of phonics in writing be supported in the classroom?

In the classroom, teachers can use a range of strategies for writing instruction as contexts for the intentional teaching of phonics. Responding to the identified needs of different groups of students and the shifting levels of support required, teachers select the most appropriate instructional strategy. Frequent and daily opportunities for students to write texts whereby they are required to transfer their phonics knowledge to authentic writing situations should be included.

In [modelled writing](#) the teacher takes responsibility for the writing, demonstrating the writing of letters and words and explicitly drawing students' attention to the phonic knowledge being used to spell words. The teacher thinks aloud, modelling the behaviours of a proficient writer with a whole class or small group of students.

The teacher still leads the writing in [shared writing](#) but invites the students' contributions. Together they share their thinking and knowledge about what phonemes they can hear in a word and the letter or group of letters that could be used to represent that sound in writing as the teacher and students co-construct a text together on paper or on the interactive whiteboard.

In [interactive writing](#) the teacher and students share the pen as they write. Here, the teacher can explicitly teach about phonics, modelling the strategies and knowledge used, and guiding the students' contributions. The teacher chooses which words or parts of words (for example, initial sounds or vowel digraphs) students will write and which students will write them. These decisions are based on what the teacher knows the students already know and can do and how this can be used to teach new skills in the context of authentic writing (Nicolazzo & Mackenzie, 2018). As the students are physically involved in writing letters of the alphabet, words or parts of words, an explicit focus is placed on spelling strategies and handwriting skills.

[Language experience](#) integrates reading, writing and talk around a shared experience. It provides high levels of support for English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) learners. In the writing stage, the teacher rehearses the language and thinks aloud about the processes used, including using phonic knowledge, as the words in a sentence co-constructed with the students, are recorded by the teacher. Students listen, contribute ideas, and practise saying the sounds they want to write down.



In [guided writing](#), the teacher works with a small group of students as they begin or continue to write a text. An intentional focus around using phonic knowledge can be planned and practised in this session and support given to individual students at their point of need.

[Independent writing](#) provides opportunities for students, either individually or in pairs, to apply their knowledge of letter sound relationships in their writing. There is still opportunity as the teacher moves around the classroom to provide further scaffolding and support of students as they draw on their phonic (and orthographic, morphological and etymological) knowledge to write.

In the classroom, writing provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of phonics. The assessment and monitoring of students' writing gives teachers useful insights into which aspects of phonic knowledge students can control as they spell unfamiliar words and where misconceptions exist. [The English Online Interview \(EOI\)](#) includes questions to assess students' phonological awareness, phonemic awareness and phonics. Asking students to [hear and then record the sounds in words](#) in a dictated sentence after explicit teaching can also provide evidence of whether phoneme-grapheme correspondences have been learned and inform further teaching. This data is important in planning an explicit and differentiated approach to the teaching of phonics in writing.



Suggestions for further discussion



1. What are our understandings around the most effective phonics instruction in writing?



2. Do we provide daily opportunities for students to practise their phonic knowledge in writing across all curriculum areas?



3. Which instructional strategy or strategies for teaching phonics in writing is best for which students? When? Why?



4. Phonological knowledge is only one aspect of learning to spell words. What are the implications for teaching writing related to this statement?



5. How do we currently monitor and assess our students' development of phonic knowledge in writing? Is it effective? Why? Why not?



6. Collaboratively assess some samples of student writing with a focus on spelling. Which students do we agree have developed knowledge of phonics and which would benefit from further support?



7. What targeted interventions in writing can be put in place to support students that find phonics challenging?



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