

Sounds-Write

What is synthetic phonics?

Synthetic phonics is a method of teaching reading which teaches letter sounds and blending these sounds together to achieve full pronunciation of whole words.

What is Sounds-Write?

Sounds-Write is the agreed synthetic phonics programme used at St John's. It is a carefully structured and sequential programme based on the principles of psychological learning theory.

At the start, simple, one sound/one spelling, one-syllable, CVC words are introduced. As the programme progresses, the complexity of one-syllable words is increased to four, five and six sound words, such as 'jump', 'swift' and 'scraps'. After this, pupils' understanding of the concept 'two letters - one sound' is further developed through the introduction of the most common consonant two-letter spellings: '<sh>', '<ch>' and '<th>', in words like 'shop', 'chimp' and 'thin', for example.

All of this is taught within a coherent framework based on the knowledge - both conceptual and factual - on which the alphabet principle and thus the writing system is based and the three key skills needed to enable learners to use the principle effectively.

The programme teaches the **conceptual knowledge** that:

- Letters represent sounds.
- Sounds can be spelt with one, two, three, or four letters.
- Sounds can be spelt in more than one way.
- Many spellings represent more than one sound.

This is achieved through the practise of word building, word reading, dictation and phoneme manipulation exercises.

The **factual knowledge** of the alphabet code is taught; pupils learn the most common ways of representing English speech sounds (phonemes).

The programme teaches the **skills** necessary to make use of the alphabet code; pupils learn how to:

- Segment - separate sounds in words.
- Blend - push sounds together to form words.
- Manipulate sounds - take sounds out and put sounds into words.

These skills are practised until pupils achieve the automaticity required for fluent reading and spelling.

Who accesses Sounds-Write sessions?

For some St John's pupils, being able to read effectively will have a significant impact on their ability to be independent in the world. However learning to read is extremely complex; and for many pupils teaching phonics may not be appropriate or useful.

When deciding if a pupil is ready to begin Sounds-Write, teachers should be confident that the pupil:

- Will be able to blend and segment after six weeks of learning 6 letter sounds. This can be with some verbal support (i.e. teacher says the sounds 'c', 'aaaa', 't' slowly, then repeats more quickly until the pupil says 'cat').

- Recognises a small bank of familiar words i.e. their name, other pupils' names, environmental print (i.e. Tesco's, McDonald's). Structured teaching tasks i.e. lotto games with words from packaging can be used to teach and assess this skill.
- Can identify their name from a selection of words of similar length and beginning with the same letter. This will ascertain if the pupil is looking at the whole word and not just the initial letter.
- Is showing an interest in text and is beginning to display reading behaviours such as attempting to follow the text with their finger as an adult reads.
- Is able to attend to 5 minutes of 1-1 teacher instruction.
- Is able to follow instructions containing 2-3 information carrying words in a distraction free environment (Derbyshire Language Scheme assessment).

If a pupil has got this far quite easily then Sounds-Write can be tried. Pupils should not be working below P5 in any area of Literacy; the vast majority should be working at P6 for Reading. However teachers should not be guided by P levels alone.

Non verbal pupils can access the programme although some activities will need to be adapted. They will need to be using a formal communication system at a reasonably sophisticated level (i.e. PECS/picture point books using sentences beyond 'I want').

Other Approaches

If phonics is not appropriate, pupils may be taught to read through recognising whole words. Teachers should begin with a small bank of words that are meaningful to the pupil. Exercises such as word to picture matching or identifying a requested word from an array of word tiles should be used. Only once the teacher is confident a pupil recognises a word, should it replace a symbol on a communication aid or schedule.

If pupils are not ready to begin Sounds Write then activities from Phase One of 'Letters and Sounds' will begin to lay the foundation for early work on sounds.

Comprehension

Reading is not just a process of interpreting the printed words since it also involves comprehension. These two skills are independently achieved and may not develop in pace with one another. A teacher must ensure they are checking comprehension (i.e. the pupil understands what the words they are reading mean) alongside teaching the Sounds-Write programme. When working on units 1-5, this can be assessed through matching word to picture exercises. At units 6-10, this can be assessed through matching short sentences to pictures.

Why Sounds-Write?

To ensure consistency Sounds-Write is the agreed phonics programme used across the school. In a comparison of different programmes and their application for pupils with learning difficulties, the following strengths of the Sounds-Write programme were identified:

- Phonemes are presented in the context of the whole word, not in isolation. Pupils do not need to be taught the sounds of the alphabet before they start learning about sounds in words (i.e. learning 'a sound a week' is not advocated)
- Lessons are written in a 'script' format to enable teachers to use accurate and consistent language from the start.
- Teachers are trained to correct blending errors where they occur, thus assisting pupils to build on the knowledge, understanding and skills they already have.

- Although writing and spelling are an essential part of each lesson, the programme is not overly concerned with handwriting.
- Pupils engage in the multi-sensory activity of saying each sound as they write; rather than learning handwriting mnemonics which can be confusing for pupils (especially those with learning difficulties).

Training

Formal training is available for teachers and support staff through an adapted two day course; this usually takes place in the summer holidays. Some teachers may attend the four day Sounds-Write course. Ongoing in house training runs throughout the year.

Reading

Case S, Philpot D, Walker J (2006) **Sounds-Write: A Linguistic Phonic Programme** *Sounds-Write Ltd*

McGuinness D (1998) **Why Children Can't Read** *Penguin, London UK*

DfES (2007) **Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics**

Imray P (2014) **Curricula for Teaching Children and Young People with Severe or Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties** *Routledge*