

Suggestions for the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

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Rationale

There are good reasons for using nonwords in the reading check, but there are also dangers to be avoided. They fall into two categories:

1. **The make-up of the Screening Check**
2. **The influence of the Screening Check on teaching**

1. The make-up of the Screening Check

It is important to make sure that

- all valid pronunciations of nonwords are accepted.
- all nonwords include only spelling patterns that are common in real words.
- the grapheme-phoneme correspondences in the words chosen are appropriate for teaching by the end of Year 1.
- the content does not favour the use of one synthetic phonics programme over another equally effective programme, especially when considering words with vowel digraphs and trigraphs.

2. Negative influence on teaching and learning

Teachers are likely to use nonwords in their daily teaching, in order to give children practice in reading them before the Screening Check. Publishers are likely to promote the use of nonwords to help teachers teach them. This could result in

- less time spent reading and writing real words
- a proliferation of lists of nonwords, where alternative pronunciations are not understood or taken into account, and words are created with spelling patterns that are unusual or do not exist in real words
- children are taught inappropriate and complicated rules about how to pronounce graphemes

The aim of my suggestions is to avoid these dangers.

Less Familiar Real Words

I suggest that there are 3 categories of words in the Phonics Screening Check:

1. Real words that are likely to be familiar to most children
2. Real words that are less likely to be familiar to most children
3. Nonwords

Assessing phonics skills

With unfamiliar real words, we could assess children's phonics skills in the same way as we can with nonwords.

Acceptably small advantage for some children

A disadvantage of using words that are unfamiliar to most children is that these words might be familiar to a few children with wide vocabularies. As a result, these children would have an advantage over other children. However, in my opinion this advantage would be acceptably small.

Encouraging good teaching

Undoubtedly this Screening Check will influence the way teachers teach. It would be good if it encouraged teachers to ask children to read unfamiliar real words. When children can decode words accurately and easily, they are able to read unfamiliar words in any text and use context to begin to understand those words. Their vocabulary increases as a result of their reading. Teachers could help children begin this process of learning new vocabulary from their reading. They could spend about a minute a day, during the phonics lesson, asking children to decode an unfamiliar word with letter-sound correspondences they had been taught, and discussing its meaning.

Here are a few example of the sort of words I mean:

bud caw cog coy dab dim ebb sip eel elk eve fee fez fib fob gum gut hag hip hob imp jag jig lag lap lob mar mid nag mop oaf paw ply pod rod rug set sly soy spy tad tar ups wed wig yam yap yen zap zed ail ape apt ark bap bay brisk brink brisk clips edit faith flick flits froth flint frill glide glint grid joint joist loin pond pride prime quill quilt quip raid rail shift skid skill skimp slick slip smith sniff tribe twig twine trips adapt alarm blade bland blaze boast brand brash clash coast crag crack champ enact drape draft gland glade loft void blond adorn aloof block booth broke abort bloom brook broth close croak croft drone flock crook frost froze globe gloom floss gloat gloss groom loot scoff scorn shoal rook scoop stomp swoop slush spool stoop shorn stork thorn stool sworn thorn breed creek creep greet sheen sleet tweed tweet florid scorch thorax snort bait bribe twine shade shank sharp shawl slave snarl span stack stain trait twine sigh flight fright plight thigh dime lime wife glide grime pride swipe tripe chime crime mope vote hone doze mode probe choke drone quote spoke ford sort cord cork horn barn hark part yarn charm chart darts harsh marsh cart larva march dirt ploy cloy ahoy bray sway bail bait hail lain wail coax foam moat loan roam deed deem feed heel feed leek keen reed reef reek reel seek teen weep chirp third thirst pert verb serf burn turf surf curd lurch spurt blurb spurn bane cane dale fake fade gape gaze lame pale rate sake sane vane tame vale wade bait leap coil snag cutlery stoat plied hake abode

Seeing Misspelled Words

I am concerned about the possibility that children will be exposed to nonwords spelled with patterns of graphemes that are unlikely in real words, and that this might harm their ability to learn to spell accurately. It seems likely to me. I find that children who read more spell better than children who read less, presumably because they see correctly spelled words more often. However, I also found evidence in Diane McGuinness's book, 'Early Reading Instruction' (2004), about adults seeing real words misspelled.

It is worth reading all of this section in the book (The Negative Impact of Seeing Misspelled Words, pp. 117 – 121). I have quoted part of it. The first two paragraphs in the following quote are less relevant, but necessary in order to understand the third paragraph:

Any teacher or college professor knows that after hours of marking student papers, one's sense of the spelling code begins to falter. What was once easy (spotting spelling errors effortlessly) now becomes tentative. Is it possible that a sense of the "wrongness" or "rightness" of particular spellings (learned over decades) could start to evaporate in such a brief period?

This phenomenon was first documented by Pintner, Rinsland, and Zubin (1929) and by Nisbet (1939). They discovered that if students took a spelling test, then saw some of the same words misspelled, when they took the spelling test again the spelling errors increased by about 15 percent. More recent studies have supported these results. Brown (1988) gave college students a spelling-dictation test of intermediate difficulty. Half the student saw half the words again and had to generate two possible phonetic spellings (misspelled) for each word. The other students did an unrelated task. The original spelling test was given again. The errors increased by 17 percent for the experimental group versus 7 percent for the controls, a highly significant result.

In a second experiment, Brown looked at the effect of seeing misspelled words rather than creating them. The experiment was run on a computer. The format was similar: a spelling-dictation test, then a spelling-recognition test (or not), followed by either a dictation or recognition test. The spelling-recognition test consisted of several spellings of the same words (tramendous, tremendus, tremendous, tremmendus), and the task was to choose the correct spelling. Students also had to rate each misspelled work according to how closely it resembled the correct spelling. The control group did a jigsaw puzzle. On the final dictation test, spelling errors were twice as high for the experimental group.

One of the most intriguing and complex studies on this topic was carried out by Jacoby and Hollingshead (1990)..... Seeing misspelled words significantly depressed spelling scores, and the probability of using the same misspelling was high (.76). This shows a "priming" effect in that recent exposure to correctly spelled words improves spelling (93 percent) for those words ...

A similar study was carried out with undergraduates in the United Kingdom (Dixon and Kaminski 1997) ... good and poor spellers alike were equally prone to the impact of misspelled words immediately and after a delay.

I do not know of any research about children and nonwords. However, it is logical to expect that there is a similar effect: A child might misspell a real word as a result of seeing a nonword spelled in an unlikely way. For example, a child asked to read the nonword "fos" might, as a result, spell "boss", "moss", "loss", "toss", "cross" with one "s" instead of two.

For the Year 1 Screening Check, this can be avoided by taking care to use only spelling patterns used frequently in real words. However, when publishers and teachers make up nonwords to "prepare children for the test", they are likely to get this wrong. This is an important reason for stressing to teachers and publishers that children should normally be taught to read only real words.

Advice for Teachers and Publishers

Here are my suggestions for content to include in leaflets for teachers and publishers.

Suggested Text for Teachers:

Recommendations for Preparing Children for the Phonics Screening Check

Use an approved synthetic phonics programme to structure daily lessons and plan for progression.

Use formative assessment to identify children who are falling behind. Provide frequent short catch-up sessions for these children.

Schools are advised to teach children to read and spell real words, and not nonwords, during normal lessons. The reasons for using nonwords in the Screening Check have been explained (*assuming the reasons have been explained earlier in the leaflet*). However, it is neither necessary nor desirable to use nonwords for normal lessons. Children who have been taught synthetic phonics well do not need to practise nonwords.

One of the reasons for using nonwords in the Screening Check is to find out if children are able to read unfamiliar words. Children can practise reading unfamiliar *real* words during their daily phonics lessons – perhaps one a day. Reading unfamiliar real words can also be used as an opportunity to extend children’s vocabulary. For example, when teaching ‘oy’, teachers could ask children to read ‘coy’ and explain what it means.

To make sure children are not confused by being asked to read nonwords, practise a few about a week before the Screening Check. Tell the children that these are not real words. You could use the examples provided and say that the words are the names of pretend monsters. (*Provide about six examples similar to the actual test.*)

If you do decide to use nonwords for teaching, take care:

- Avoid exposing children to spelling patterns that are unusual or do not exist in English words, because such exposure may affect spelling skills. For example, it would be unwise to ask children to read ‘bighn’, because ‘igh’ followed by ‘n’ does not exist in any English words.
- Be aware of alternative pronunciations for words that are commonly pronounced in more than one way. For example, ‘ea’ may be pronounced as in ‘bead’ or as in ‘head’, so /keed/ and /ked/ are both acceptable pronunciations for the nonword, ‘kead’.

Suggested Text for Publishers:

Recommendations for supporting teachers in ensuring that children are prepared for the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

Provide resources that support the teaching of phonics according to the DfE criteria for assuring high-quality phonic work.

Do not promote resources for teaching nonwords. Our advice to schools is that they teach children to read and spell real words, and not nonwords, during normal lessons. The reasons for using nonwords in the Screening Check have been explained (*assuming the reasons have been explained earlier in the leaflet*). However, it is neither necessary nor desirable to use nonwords for normal lessons. Children who have been taught synthetic phonics well do not need to practise nonwords.

Great care has been taken in the choice of words for the Screening Check. By inventing nonwords for teaching, publishers risk choosing words with spelling patterns that are unusual or do not exist in English words, and such exposure might affect spelling skills. For example, it would be unwise to ask children to read 'bighn', because 'igh' followed by 'n' does not exist in any English words. Another risk is that alternative pronunciations of graphemes are not allowed for. For example, 'ea' may be pronounced as in 'bead' or as in 'head', so /keed/ and /ked/ are both acceptable pronunciations for the nonword, 'kead'.

One of the reasons for using nonwords in the Screening Check is to find out if children are able to read unfamiliar words. We have suggested to teachers that children practise reading unfamiliar real words during their daily phonics lessons – perhaps one a day. Reading unfamiliar real words can also be used as an opportunity to extend children's vocabulary. For example, when teaching 'oy', teachers could ask children to read 'coy' and explain what it means. Publishers could consider providing suitable words for phonics lessons. The words should include only grapheme-phoneme correspondences that have been taught at the relevant stage. Here are a few more examples: 'sip', 'dab', 'cog', 'skimp', 'stoop', 'weep', 'creek', 'doze', 'sway', 'coax', 'verb', 'lurch', 'gaze', 'bait'.

Instructions for Administering the Screening Check

A suggested script:

- Ask children to read the following words.
- Do not give any help in reading the words, only general encouragement.
- Allow children as much time as they need to attempt the words, as long as they show signs that they may be able to read them independently.
- Allow children to say the sounds before saying the whole word, or to say only the whole word without saying the sounds.
- Do not suggest to a child to try again, but allow spontaneous self-correction.
- Do not tell children if they are right or wrong. If they ask, give them only general encouragement and ask them to try the next word.
- Stop when the child makes 3 consecutive errors.
- Record the number of words read correctly.

Choosing the Words – for Both Real and Nonwords

Order for presenting words to children for the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check.

I suggest the order as in Sound Discovery by Marlynne Grant, with a few changes to make it suitable for Year 1 and not specific to Sound Discovery, as follows:

1. alphabet cvc (big)
2. alphabet cvcc (list)
3. alphabet ccvc (stop)
4. alphabet ccvcc, cccvc and cvccc (plump, strum, helps)
5. consonant digraphs sh, ch, th ng (fish, chop, then, sing)
6. common vowel digraphs and igh and air (see below for more detail)
7. polysyllabic words, including simple compound words and words with simple suffixes (combat, jumping, happy)

Vowel digraphs and trigraphs are problematic, because they are taught in different sequences in different effective synthetic phonics programmes. These suggestions take account of that:

- Include all the following vowel digraphs and trigraphs, with no preference for one alternative grapheme (for the same phoneme) over others:
ai, ay, a-e, ee, ea, ie, igh, i-e, oa, ow (slow), o-e, oo, ou, ow (found), ar, er, ir, ur, or, air
- The marking structure should be such that all children are expected to get a good proportion of these correct, e.g. one third, to show that they have mastered at least one way of spelling most vowel phonemes.

Accept more than one pronunciation for the following in nonwords:

- th (thick, then)
- ow (cow, slow)
- ea (cream, head)
- ending in –s (chops, runs)
- 2 syllable words where a vowel grapheme is commonly pronounced in real words with 'schwa' (return, melon)
- ew, ue, u-e (/oo/, /yoo/ blew, few) – although it may be simpler to exclude these
- oo (look, moon)
- -u- (/u/ or /oo/ as in but or put)
- ch (church, school)
- other regional pronunciations

Exclude the following from check:

- Words with unusual spelling patterns (spiv, taxi)
- Nonwords with spelling patterns that are unusual or do not exist in real words (one syllable words ending in –l, –c, –k, –f, –s, because they should end in –ll, –ck, –ff, –ss, words ending with –ou, –oi, –ai, because they should end in –ow, –oy, –ay)
- Words with graphemes that may not be taught before Year 2, even with a good synthetic phonics programme (field, photo)

- One syllable words ending in a single vowel letter (the, my, he, go)
- Words with spelling patterns which are common in only a few high frequency words (do, could)
- Words, where the pronunciation depends on rules, usually with a few exceptions (find, cent, city, icy, age, figit, gym, wasp, quad, talk). This excludes 2 syllable words with 'y' at the end (happy), which could be included in the check.
- Words with graphemes spelled with 3 or more letters, except igh and air (ear, eigh)
- Words with consonant graphemes with 'silent' letters (gn, kn, wr, ps, rh, mb, gn)
- Words with suffixes which are not straightforward to pronounce (-ed, -sion)

Suggestions for choosing words within these criteria for each Screening Check

Types of Words	Real words likely to be familiar	Real words less likely to be familiar	Nonwords
VC VCC	4	2	2
CVCC	2	1	1
CCVC	2	1	1
CCVCC	1	0	0
CCVCV CVCCC	1	0	0
Consonant digraphs	2	1	1
Vowel di/tri graphs	6	3	3
2 syllable words	4	2	2
Total	20	10	10

Suggestions for choosing 12 words with vowel digraphs and trigraphs

Choose 3 real words, each from a different row and column.

Choose 2 nonwords, each from a different row and column, with graphemes not used in the real words that have already been chosen.

oi	ay	a-e
oa	ow (as snow)	o-e
ie	igh	i-e

2 familiar words, 1 less familiar, 2 nonwords

Choose 1 word.

er	ur	ir
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1 familiar word

Choose 3 words, each from a different row.

ee	ea (as cream)
ou	ow (as town)
oi	oy

1 familiar word, 1 less familiar, 1 nonword

Choose 4 words, 1 for each grapheme.

oo	or	ar	air
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2 familiar words, 1 less familiar, 1 nonword

I am not in favour of two levels for the Screening Check, because of the difficulty of deciding which vowel digraphs and trigraphs to include at each level. I suggest just a simple score.