

# How to Choose a Phonics Programme by Elizabeth Nonweiler

There are hundreds of programmes available for teaching phonics. If you are responsible for choosing one, take time to look carefully at the content, reputation and cost of several programmes before making a decision.

First, of course, you should choose a programme that is based on the best evidence available. Unfortunately, in education it is not always clear what the best evidence is, because there are so many variables, as well as claims that cannot be justified. However, the evidence is overwhelming that children should be taught phonics for reading and spelling words. Further evidence indicates that the best way to teach phonics is through a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme. There is little reliable evidence, if any, comparing SSP programmes with each other, but if you examine some, you will find there are many differences to take into account.

A good starting point for choosing a programme is to find out if it complies with the “Essential core criteria for effective systematic synthetic phonics teaching programmes” published by the Department for Education for England (DfE). If a programme has been validated by the DfE, then it has been judged to comply with the criteria. If it has not been validated, it would be a good idea to check it against these core criteria.

Next read “Guidance for choosing a phonics programme” in Appendix 7 of *The reading framework: Teaching the foundations of literacy*. This will help you to consider the differences between programmes that comply with the DfE’s core criteria.

Here is a summary of questions to ask yourself:

1. Is this a systematic synthetic phonics programme?
2. What evidence is there that it is successful?
3. What does it cost?
4. What resources are included?
5. How detailed is the guidance?
6. What are the options for training?

Read on for a detailed description of a systematic synthetic phonics programme from the *DfE’s Essential core criteria* and for more detailed questions about SSP programmes from *The reading framework*.

From *Essential core criteria*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-teaching-materials-core-criteria-and-self-assessment/validation-of-systematic-synthetic-phonics-programmes-supporting-documentation#criteria-for-validation>

The programme should:

1. constitute a complete SSP programme providing fidelity to its teaching framework for the duration of the programme (see [note 1](#)).
2. present systematic, synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print (see [note 1](#))
3. enable children to start learning phonic knowledge and skills early ...
4. be designed for daily teaching sessions and teach the main grapheme-phoneme correspondences [GPCs] of English (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
5. begin by introducing a defined group of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that enable children to read and spell many words early on
6. progress from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills, cumulatively covering all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences in English
7. teach children to read printed words by identifying and blending (synthesising) individual phonemes, from left to right all through the word
8. teach children to apply the skill of segmenting spoken words into their constituent phonemes for spelling and that this is the reverse of blending phonemes to read words
9. provide opportunity for children to practise and apply known phoneme-grapheme correspondences for spelling through dictation of sounds, words and sentences
10. ensure that children are taught to decode and spell common exception words (sometimes called 'tricky' words), appropriate to their level of progress in the programme (see [note 2](#))
11. provide resources that support the teaching of lower-case and capital letters correctly, with clear start and finish points. The programme should move children on by teaching them to write words made up of learned GPCs, followed by simple sentences composed from such words as well as any common exception words ('tricky words') learned (see [note 3](#))
12. be built around direct teaching sessions, with extensive teacher-child interaction and involve a multi-sensory approach. The programme should include guidance on how direct teaching sessions can be adapted for online delivery (live or recorded) (see [notes 4 and 5](#))
13. provide resources to enable teachers to deliver the programme effectively including sufficient decodable reading material ( see [notes 6 and 7](#)) to ensure that, as children move through the early stages of acquiring phonic knowledge and skills, they can practise by reading texts closely matched to their level of phonic

attainment, that do not require them to use alternative strategies to read unknown words (important, see [note 7](#))

14. include guidance and resources to ensure children practise and apply the core phonics they have been taught ... (see [note 8](#))
15. enable children's progress to be assessed and highlight the ways in which the programme meets the needs of those who are at risk of falling behind, including the lowest attaining 20% of children (see [note 9](#))
16. provide full guidance for teachers to support the effective delivery of the programme and appropriate, programme-specific training either directly, through appointed agents or remotely; with assurances that there is sufficient capacity to do so and that those delivering this training will have appropriately high levels of expertise and relevant experience (see [note 10](#))

## Explanatory notes ...

### Note 1

Phonics is best understood as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabetic system works, and how to apply it in reading and spelling, rather than one of a range of optional 'methods' or 'strategies' for teaching children how to read. A programme should promote the use of phonics as the route to reading unknown words, before any subsequent comprehension strategies are applied. It should not encourage children to guess unknown words from clues such as pictures or context, rather than first applying phonic knowledge and skills. It should not include lists of high frequency words or any other words for children to learn as whole shapes 'by sight'. The focus should be on phonemes, and not on 'consonant clusters' (/s/+p+/l/ not /spl/) or 'onset and rime' (/c+/a+/t/ not c-at, m-at, b-at).

### Note 2

Common exception (or 'tricky') words are those that include grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) that are an exception to those children have been taught. They include correspondences that are unusual and those that will be taught later in the programme (such as 'said' and 'me'). Programmes should teach children to read and then spell the most common exception words, noting the part of a word that makes it an exception word. These words should be introduced gradually.

### **Note 3**

At first, children should not be taught to join letters or to start every letter 'on the line' with a 'lead-in', because these practices cause unnecessary difficulty for beginners. Children may be taught to join the letters in digraphs, but this is optional. (All resources designed for children to read should be in print).

### **Note 4**

Direct teaching sessions should involve a routine so that teachers and children get to know what is coming next and minimum time is spent explaining new activities. Teaching and learning activities should be interesting and engaging but firmly focused on intensifying the learning associated with the phonic goal. Where computer-based resources are included, these should support or supplement direct teaching by the teacher, but not replace it.

### **Note 5**

At each step, children should have sufficient time to practise reading and writing with the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they have been taught, cumulatively. For this purpose, the programme should provide:

- a) words and texts for reading practice
- b) teaching activities for writing practice (letter formation and spelling)

Resources provided as part of the programme such as:

- flash cards
- friezes
- word cards
- grapheme wall posters

should match the GPCs and progressions in the programme.

## **Note 6**

The texts and books children are asked to read independently should be fully decodable for them at every stage of the programme. This means they must be composed almost entirely of words made up of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that a child has learned up to that point. The only exceptions should be a small number of common exception words (see [note 2](#)) that the child has learned as part of the programme up to that point. In the early stages, even these should be kept to a minimum. Practising with such decodable texts will help to make sure children experience success and learn to rely on phonic strategies.

## **Note 7**

If a complete programme relies on guidance on the teaching of phonics from one publisher and decodable books from another, the programme publisher must demonstrate:

- a) where matching decodable books can be sourced
- b) how these decodable books match the phonic progression of the programme ...

## **Note 8**

A phonics programme should not include teaching and learning activities that are:

- over elaborate
- difficult to manage
- take children too long to complete
- will likely make children focus on something other than reading or writing

For example, it should not include finding letters in sand, because children are likely to focus more on playing with sand than on learning about letters. Teaching and learning activities like this may be valuable for other areas of learning including developing language but are not suitable for core phonics provision ...

## **Note 9**

Full guidance should include clear expectations for children's progress. If the programme is high quality, systematic and synthetic it will, by design, map incremental progression in phonic knowledge and skills. It should therefore enable teachers to conduct frequent and ongoing assessment to track and record children's progress and to identify those children at, below or above expected levels, so that appropriate support can be provided.

Children who are at risk of falling behind need extra practice to consolidate and master the content of the programme ... Options for support could include 1 to 1 tutoring. They should not suggest or provide a different SSP programme for these children.

## **Note 10**

High-quality training is an essential element of an SSP programme and is key to ensuring it is effectively implemented with fidelity and consistency within settings. A comprehensive programme of training must ensure continuous professional development of all those leading or delivering phonics teaching, assessing children's progress and supporting children who are at risk of falling behind the expected pace of the programme.

Programmes should demonstrate how they will ensure those delivering the training are appropriately qualified and that they have the capability, capacity and resources to provide on-going support to those teaching phonics in different settings. Programmes should also demonstrate a responsive approach to changing circumstances and an ability to adapt delivery methods when required.

From *The Reading Framework: Teaching the Foundations of Literacy*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-reading-framework-teaching-the-foundations-of-literacy>

**Appendix 7, Guidance for choosing a phonics programme**

## General

- Can the publisher point to studies, existing practice or evaluations as evidence of the success of the programme?
- Have school leaders spoken to staff in other schools where the programme is being used?
- Have school leaders and teachers visited other schools to see the programme being used and where excellent results have been achieved in the phonics screening check?
- Have any other new SSP programmes been considered?
- Is the programme deemed to be complete after two years or does the publisher provide further guidance and resources to build on the foundations?

## Costs

- How is the programme accessed, e.g. with a licence online, only through training, in hard copy directly from the publisher, and what are the costs of these different options?
- How is training paid for, e.g. one fee for all staff in the school or a fee for each member of staff?
- What is the estimated total cost of the programme each year, including training and resources?

## Training

- What are the options for training, e.g. from a trainer visiting the school, by sending staff to a training venue, by webinar or by completing a course remotely? Are online training films available?
- To what extent are schools supported following training? How is the initial training reinforced and updated?
- What provision is made for teachers who are new to the school to access training individually?

## Groupings

- Does the programme recommend whole-class grouping or grouping according to children's reading progress? To what extent might one arrangement suit your school more than another?

## Resources

- How are resources provided, e.g. ready-made, to photocopy, to print from online, only with training?
- Are resources non-digital, digital (e.g. electronic whiteboard, online software application) or both?
- What does the programme provide for the teacher to use with children, e.g. letter cards, word cards, alphabetic code charts, other resources to display to support learning?
- What does the programme provide for the children to practise and apply reading and writing words and sentences, e.g. plain texts, 'decodable' books, activity sheets, pupil books?
- What does the programme provide to support letter formation?
- Are the resources especially suitable for young children or suitable for both young children and older pupils who have not yet mastered the early stages?

When you have chosen a programme, make sure that *all* your teaching staff have enough training to understand the principles of teaching synthetic phonics. Those using the programme should have full training from authorised trainers in how to teach it.

Then enjoy seeing the rapid progress children make with an effective programme and a competent teacher who follows its guidance.

Elizabeth Nonweiler, May 2023