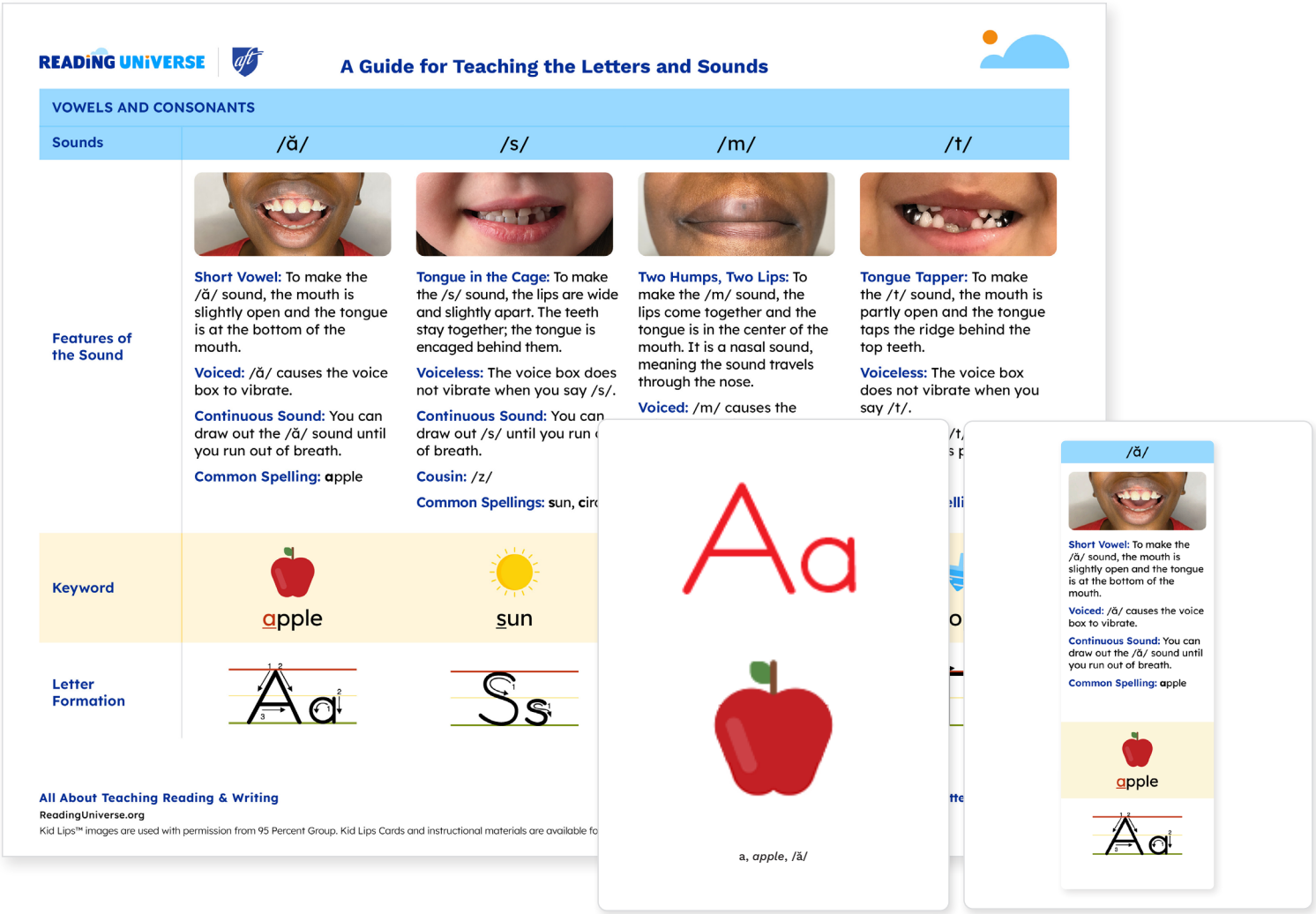
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

Phonics instruction begins with students learning the 26 letters found in the Roman alphabet, which is made up of vowels and consonants. When teaching the alphabetic principle, students should learn the name, sound, a keyword for memory aid, and letter formation. This guide includes support for teaching these components and is sequenced in an order comparable to many scope and sequences found in reading programs.

Teacher Tip:

You can cut out each column and attach it to the back of your letter flash cards to help you remember the characteristics of that sound. For each sound, you'll see sound features, mouth shape, keywords, and letter formation.



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A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS				
Sounds	/ă/	/s/	/m/	/t/
Features of the Sound	**Short Vowel:** To make the /ă/ sound, the mouth is slightly open and the tongue is at the bottom of the mouth. **Voiced:** /ă/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ă/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** apple	**Tongue in the Cage:** To make the /s/ sound, the lips are wide and slightly apart. The teeth stay together; the tongue is encaged behind them. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /s/. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out /s/ until you run of breath. **Cousin:** /z/ **Common Spellings:** sun, cir	**Two Humps, Two Lips:** To make the /m/ sound, the lips come together and the tongue is in the center of the mouth. It is a nasal sound, meaning the sound travels through the nose. **Voiced:** /m/ causes the	**Tongue Tapper:** To make the /t/ sound, the mouth is partly open and the tongue taps the ridge behind the top teeth. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /t/.
Keyword	apple	sun		
Letter Formation	Aa	Ss		

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Aa

a, *apple*, /ă/

/ă/

Short Vowel: To make the /ă/ sound, the mouth is slightly open and the tongue is at the bottom of the mouth.

Voiced: /ă/ causes the voice box to vibrate.

Continuous Sound: You can draw out the /ă/ sound until you run out of breath.

Common Spelling: apple

apple

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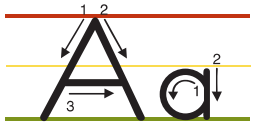
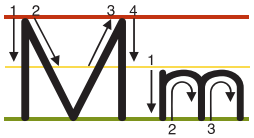
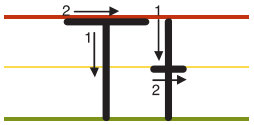
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Sounds	/ă/	/s/	/m/	/t/
Features of the Sound	**Short Vowel:** To make the /ă/ sound, the mouth is slightly open and the tongue is at the bottom of the mouth. **Voiced:** /ă/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ă/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **a**pple	**Tongue in the Cage:** To make the /s/ sound, the lips are wide and slightly apart. The teeth stay together; the tongue is encaged behind them. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /s/. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out /s/ until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /z/ **Common Spellings:** **s**un, **c**ircus	**Two Humps, Two Lips:** To make the /m/ sound, the lips come together and the tongue is in the center of the mouth. It is a nasal sound, meaning the sound travels through the nose. **Voiced:** /m/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out /m/ until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **m**oon	**Tongue Tapper:** To make the /t/ sound, the mouth is partly open and the tongue taps the ridge behind the top teeth. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /t/. **Stop Sound:** /t/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /d/ **Common Spelling:** **t**op
Keyword	apple	sun	moon	top
Letter Formation				

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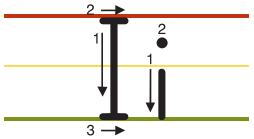
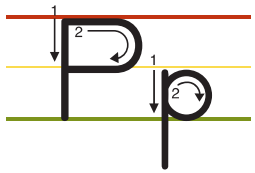
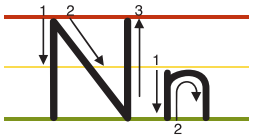
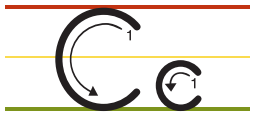
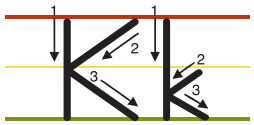
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Sounds	/ĭ/	/p/	/n/	/k/
Features of the Sound	**Short Vowel:** To make the /ĭ/ sound, the mouth is spread wide and the teeth are slightly apart. The tongue is lifted slightly. **Voiced:** /ĭ/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ĭ/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **i**gloo	**Lip Popper:** To make the /p/ sound, the lips come together and then pop open with a burst of air. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /p/. **Stop Sound:** /p/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /b/ **Common Spelling:** **p**ig	**Tongue Toucher:** To make the /n/ sound, the tongue touches the ridge behind the top teeth. It is a nasal sound, meaning the sound travels through the nose. **Voiced:** /n/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /n/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** **n**est, **kn**ight	**Throat Sound:** To make the /k/ sound, the mouth is open and the back of the tongue touches the back of the mouth near the throat. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /k/. **Stop Sound:** /k/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /g/ **Common Spellings:** **c**ap, **k**it, lu**ck**
Keyword	igloo	pig	nest	car	kite
Letter Formation					

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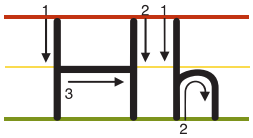
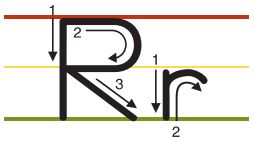
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Sounds	/ŏ/	/g/	/h/	/r/
Features of the Sound	**Short Vowel:** To make the /ŏ/ sound, the mouth is open wide and the tongue is in the bottom of the mouth. **Voiced:** /ŏ/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous:** You can draw out the /ŏ/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **o**ctopus	**Throat Sound:** To make the /g/ sound, the mouth is open and the back of the tongue touches the back of the mouth near the throat. **Voiced:** /g/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Stop Sound:** /g/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /k/ **Common Spelling:** **g**oat	**Windy Sound:** To make the /h/ sound, the mouth is open and tongue is in the center of the mouth. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /h/. **Continuous:** You can draw out the /h/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **h**eart	**Back Tongue Lifter:** To make the /r/ sound, the tongue lifts up and back with the back sides of it touching the inside molars. The tongue should be tense. **Voiced:** /r/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /r/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **r**ainbow
Keyword	octopus	goat	heart	rainbow
Letter Formation				

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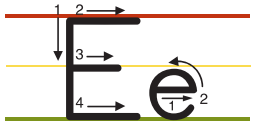
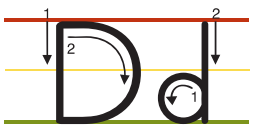
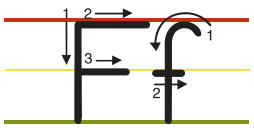
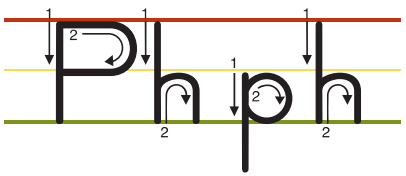
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Sounds	/ĕ/	/d/	/f/
Features of the Sound	**Short Vowel:** To make the /ĕ/ sound, the mouth is slightly open and the tongue is relaxed in the middle of the mouth. The tip of the tongue rests on the back of the bottom teeth. **Voiced:** /ĕ/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ĕ/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **e**gg	**Tongue Tapper:** To make the /d/ sound, the mouth is partly open and the tongue taps the ridge behind the top teeth. **Voiced:** /d/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Stop Sound:** /d/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /t/ **Common Spelling:** **d**og	**Lip Biter:** To make the /f/ sound, the lower lip is curled in and the top teeth go over the bottom lip. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /f/. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /f/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /v/ **Common Spellings:** **f**ish, **ph**one, pu**ff**
Keyword	edge	dog	fish	phone
Letter Formation				

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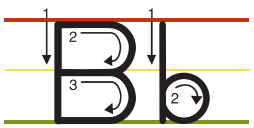
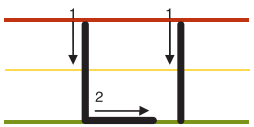
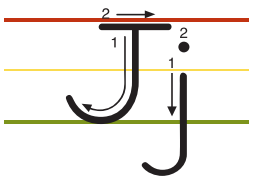
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Sounds	/ŭ/	/b/	/l/	/j/
Features of the Sound	**Short Vowel:** To make the /ŭ/ sound, the mouth is mostly open and the tongue is in the middle of the mouth and pulled back. **Voiced:** /ŭ/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ŭ/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **u**p	**Lip Popper:** To make the /b/ sound, the lips come together and then pop open with a burst of air. **Voiced:** /b/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Stop Sound:** /b/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /p/ **Common Spelling:** **b**at	**Front Tongue Lifter:** To make the /l/ sound, the mouth is open and the tip of the tongue lifts and touches behind the top teeth. **Voiced:** /l/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /l/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** **l**amp, fa**ll**	**Quick Lip Pusher:** To make the /j/ sound, the lips are pursed and a quick push of air comes out of the mouth; the tongue touches the roof of the mouth. **Voiced:** /j/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Stop Sound:** /j/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /ch/ **Common Spellings:** **j**elly, ca**ge**, e**dge**
Keyword	up	bat	lamp	jelly
Letter Formation				

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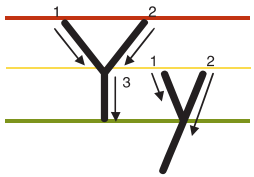
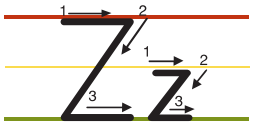
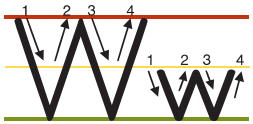
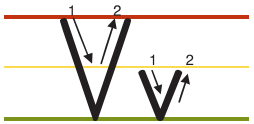
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Sounds	/y/	/z/	/w/	/v/
Features of the Sound	**Tongue Presser:** To make the /y/ sound, the tongue is lifted to the roof of the mouth and presses on the upper side teeth. **Voiced:** /y/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /y/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** **y**o**y**o	**Tongue in the Cage:** To make the /z/ sound, the lips are wide and slightly apart. The teeth stay together; the tongue is encaged behind them. **Voiced:** /z/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous:** You can draw out the /z/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /s/ **Common Spellings:** **z**ebra, bu**zz**	**Lip Rounder:** To make the /w/ sound, the lips purse in a circular shape and push out air. **Voiced:** /w/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /w/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /wh/ **Common Spelling:** **w**agon	**Lip Biter:** To make the /v/ sound, the lower lip is curled in and the teeth go over the bottom lip. **Voiced:** /v/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /v/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /f/ **Common Spelling:** **v**iolin
Keyword	yoyo	zebra	wagon	violin
Letter Formation				

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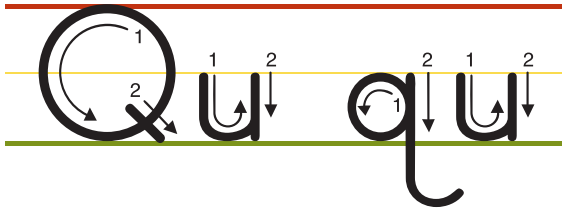
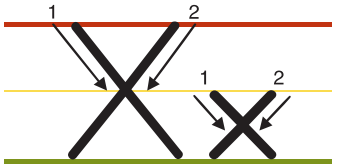
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

MOVING CONSONANTS

The letters ‘q’ and ‘x’ are outliers to the other 24 letters of the alphabet. These two letters are articulated with two sounds. The letter ‘q’ never is written without a ‘u’, so when teaching letter name and letter formation, they should be seen together and practiced together to reinforce this concept.

SOUNDS	/kw/	/ks/
FEATURES OF THE SOUND	**Starting Position** **Final Position** **Moving Consonant:** /kw/ is produced with two sounds. The mouth starts open with the back of the tongue touching the back of the mouth, then the mouth is pursed in a circular shape. One sound slides into the other. **Common Spelling:** **qu**estion	**Starting Position** **Final Position** **Moving Consonant:** /ks/ is produced with two sounds. The mouth starts open with the back of the tongue touching the back of the mouth, then the tongue slides forward as the lips are spread wide and the teeth stay together. One sound slides into the other. **Common Spelling:** bo**x**
KEYWORD	question	box
LETTER FORMATION		

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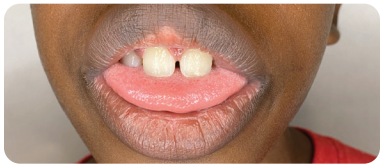
A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

DIGRAPHS

After teaching all the vowels and consonants, students are ready to learn digraphs. Digraphs are two letters that represent one speech sound. The order represented here is similar to the order found on many scope and sequences in reading programs. Do not introduce all the digraphs at one time. Instead, spread out the instruction over several weeks.

Sounds	/zh/	/sh/	/th/	/ch/
Features of the Sound	**Long Lip Pusher:** To make the /zh/ sound, the lips pucker and push out air. **Voiced:** /zh/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /zh/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** tre**a**sure, deci**s**ion	**Long Lip Pusher:** To make the /sh/ sound, the lips pucker and push out air. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /sh/. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /sh/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** **sh**oe, sta**ti**on	 **Tongue Biter:** To make the /th/ sound, the top teeth bite down on the tongue and the tongue comes out. Air is pushed around the tongue. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /th/. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /th/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /TH/ **Common Spelling:** **th**umb	**Quick Lip Pusher:** To make the /ch/ sound, the lips are pursed and a quick push of air comes out of the mouth; the tongue touches the roof of the mouth. **Voiceless:** The voice box does not vibrate when you say /ch/. **Stop Sound:** /ch/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Cousin:** /j/ **Common Spellings:** **ch**air, ma**tch**
Keyword	treasure	shoe	thumb	chair

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A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

DIGRAPHS

After teaching all the vowels and consonants, students are ready to learn digraphs. Digraphs are two letters that represent one speech sound. The order represented here is similar to the order found on many scope and sequences in reading programs. Do not introduce all the digraphs at one time. Instead, spread out the instruction over several weeks.

Sounds	/wh/	/TH/	/ng/
Features of the Sound	 **Lip Rounder:** To make the /wh/ sound, the lips purse in a circular shape and push out air. **Voiced:** /wh/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /wh/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /w/ **Common Spelling:** **wh**istle	 **Tongue Biter:** To make the /TH/ sound, the top teeth bite down on the tongue and the tongue comes out. Air is pushed around the tongue. **Voiced:** /TH/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /TH/ sound until you run out of breath. **Cousin:** /th/ **Common Spelling:** fea**th**er	 **Nasal Sound:** To make the /ng/ sound, the back of the tongue is lifted in the back of the mouth near the throat, closing off airflow so the air travels through the nose. **Voiced:** /ng/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ng/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spelling:** ri**ng**
Keyword	 whistle	 feather	 ring

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A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

LONG VOWELS

Long vowels should be introduced after students are proficient in recognizing and reading short vowel patterns. Long vowels are produced with one sound, but represented by many graphemes and are not typically taught all at once. You can explicitly teach the long vowel phonemes when teaching each long vowel grapheme. This is not meant to be a sequence.

Sounds	/ā/	/ē/	/ī/	/ō/	/ū/
Features of the Sound	**Long Vowel:** To make the /ā/ sound, the mouth is open and the tongue is in the bottom of the mouth. **Voiced:** /ā/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ā/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** c**a**ke, r**ai**n, s**ay**, b**a**by, th**ey**, gr**ea**t, **ei**ght	**Long Vowel:** To make the /ē/ sound, the mouth is spread wide in a smile and the tongue is lifted. **Voiced:** /ē/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ē/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** tr**ee**, b**ea**d, m**e**, k**ey**, cook**ie**, funn**y**, sc**e**ne, f**ie**ld	**Long Vowel:** To make the /ī/ sound, the mouth is partially open and the tongue is in the bottom of the mouth. **Voiced:** /ī/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ī/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** k**i**te, p**ie**, sk**y**, n**igh**t, t**i**tle	**Long Vowel:** To make the /ō/ sound, the mouth is open in a circular shape. **Voiced:** /ō/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ō/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** r**o**se, sl**ow**, n**o**, b**oa**t, **o**ver, t**oe**	**Long Vowel:** To make the /ū/ sound, the mouth is puckered in a circular shape and the tongue is lifted. **Voiced:** /ū/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ū/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** **u**nicorn, f**u**se, f**ew**
Keyword	cake	tree	kite	rose	unicorn

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A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

/o͝o/ AND /AW/

Sounds	/o͝o/	/o͞o/	/aw/
Features of the Sound	**Vowel Digraph:** To make the /o͝o/ sound, the mouth is slightly puckered in a circular shape and the tongue is lifted. **Voiced:** /o͝o/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Stop Sound:** /o͝o/ has a quick stop after it is produced. **Common Spellings:** b**oo**k, p**u**sh, w**ou**ld	**Vowel Digraph:** To make the /o͞o/ sound, the mouth is puckered in a circular shape and the tongue is lifted. **Voiced:** /o͞o/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /o͞o/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** t**oo**l, bl**ew**, gl**ue**	**Vowel Combination:** To make the /aw/ sound, the mouth is open wide and the lips are slightly rounded. The pronunciation differs by region. **Voiced:** /aw/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /aw/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** dr**aw**, h**au**l
Keyword	book	tool	draw

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A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

R-CONTROLLED VOWELS

R-controlled vowels are typically taught after the magic (or silent) ‘e’ pattern. The vowel pattern is spelled with an ‘r’ following a vowel: ‘ar’, ‘or’, ‘er’, ‘ir’, and ‘ur’. These vowel patterns are typically introduced in the order below.

Sounds	/ar/	/or/	/er/
Features of the Sound			
	Vowel-r: /ar/ is a blended sound shaped by the ‘r’.	**Vowel-r:** /or/ is a blended sound shaped by the ‘r’.	**Vowel-r:** /er/ is a blended sound shaped by the ‘r’.
	Voiced: /ar/ causes the voice box to vibrate.	**Voiced:** /or/ causes the voice box to vibrate.	**Voiced:** /er/ causes the voice box to vibrate.
	Continuous Sound: You can draw out the /ar/ sound until you run out of breath.	**Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /or/ sound until you run out of breath.	**Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /er/ sound until you run out of breath.
	Common Spelling: c**ar**	**Common Spelling:** f**or**k	**Common Spellings:** b**ir**d, h**er**, b**ur**n
Keyword	car	fork	bird

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A Guide for Teaching the Letters and Sounds

DIPHTHONGS AND THE SCHWA

Diphthongs are vowels produced by the tongue shifting during articulation. This is why there are two mouth images shown for each sound. A schwa is the empty vowel sound in an unstressed syllable. The most common sound for schwa is /uh/. Any vowel letter can spell the schwa sound. These patterns are not represented in any sequence.

SOUNDS	/oi/	/ow/	/ə/
	Starting Position **Final Position**	**Starting Position** **Final Position**	
FEATURES OF THE SOUND	**Diphthong:** /oi/ is produced with two sounds. The mouth starts with the tongue in the middle of the mouth and pulled back, with rounded lips and jaw lowered. Then the tongue moves upward and forward as the jaw closes and lips move to a slight smile. One sound slides into the other. **Voiced:** /oi/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /oi/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** t**oy**, c**oi**n	**Diphthong:** /ow/ is produced with two sounds. The mouth starts open, then the lips purse in a circular shape. One sound slides into the other. **Voiced:** /ow/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Continuous Sound:** You can draw out the /ow/ sound until you run out of breath. **Common Spellings:** c**ow**, h**ou**se	**Schwa:** To make the /ə/ sound, the mouth is slightly open and the tongue is in the center of the mouth. It is an unstressed syllable. **Voiced:** /ə/ causes the voice box to vibrate. **Common Spellings:** **a**larm, tick**e**t, c**o**nfess
KEYWORD	toy	house	alarm

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