FREE JARGON BUSTER

Phonics & EYFS Jargon Buster

32 phonics and EYFS terms explained in plain English, each with a quick example. Look up a term, read the example, then try it with a real word.

ⓘ Terms as used in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own early years frameworks.

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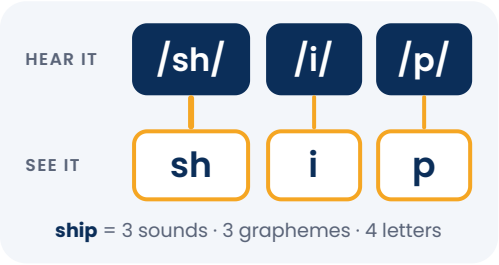

ship = 3 sounds · 3 graphemes · 4 letters

The big three

Phoneme — The smallest unit of sound that changes a word's meaning. Written between slashes.
Change **/c/** to **/h/** and *cat* becomes *hat*.

Grapheme — A letter, or group of letters, that represents one phoneme.
sh, **i** and **p** in *ship*.

GPC — **Grapheme–phoneme correspondence:** the link between a grapheme and the phoneme it stands for. Some programmes say "letter-sounds".

A Sounds and letters

Digraph
Two letters that make one sound.

E.G. sh, ch, th, ng, ai, ee, oa, oo, as in **sh**op, r**ai**n, b**oa**t

Trigraph
Three letters that make one sound.

E.G. n**igh**t, ch**air**, pa**tch**, he**dge**

Split digraph also: "magic e"
A digraph whose two letters are split by another letter.

E.G. m**a**k**e**, b**i**k**e**, h**o**m**e**

Adjacent consonants also: consonant clusters
Two or more consonants side by side that each keep their own sound. They are not digraphs.

E.G. **st**op, **spl**ash (s-p-l is 3 sounds)

Pure sounds
Saying each phoneme clearly, without adding an "uh" sound, so blending is easier.

E.G. say "mmm", not "muh"; "sss", not "suh"

Schwa
The weak "uh" vowel sound heard in unstressed syllables.

E.G. the **a** in **a**long and sof**a**

Alternative spellings
One sound can be spelled in more than one way, and one grapheme can make more than one sound.

E.G. /ai/ r**ai**n, d**ay**, m**a**k**e** · "ow" c**ow**, sn**ow**

Tricky to say
/b/, **/d/**, **/g/** and **/j/** can't be heard clearly on their own without a tiny "uh". Keep it as short as you can.

Try it

Count the phonemes: ship · night · frog · splash
Spot the digraph: chip · rain · boat

ANSWERS
ship 3 · night 3 · frog 4 · splash 5
ch · ai · oa

B Reading and spelling skills

Oral blending
Merging spoken sounds into a word, without looking at any letters.

E.G. adult says "d-o-g", child says "dog!"

Blending
Saying the phonemes in a written word in order, then merging them to read the word.

E.G. /sh/ /i/ /p/ → **ship**

Segmenting
Breaking a spoken word into its phonemes, in order, so you can spell it.

E.G. frog → /f/ /r/ /o/ /g/ → f-r-o-g

Decoding and encoding
Decoding turns written words into speech (reading). Encoding turns speech into writing (spelling).

E.G. reading "chip" is decoding; writing it is encoding

Phonemic awareness
Hearing and telling apart the separate phonemes in spoken words.

E.G. knowing "sun" and "sit" start with the same sound

Fluency
Reading accurately, at a good pace and with expression, so attention can go on meaning.

E.G. reading a page smoothly, not sound by sound

C Words, books, programmes and checks

Common exception words also: "tricky words"
Words with unusual GPCs, or GPCs not taught yet. This is the national curriculum term.

E.G. the, said, was, you

Decodable books
Books built in small steps, so children can read almost every word using the GPCs they've been taught.

E.G. "Pip sat in a tin." uses only s, a, t, p, i, n

Pseudo-words also: "alien words"
Made-up words that follow real spelling patterns, used to check decoding.

E.G. vap, blim, zort

Sound buttons
Marks many programmes use: a dot under a one-letter grapheme, a line under a digraph or trigraph.

E.G. <u>sh</u> i p

Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP)
Teaching GPCs in a planned order (systematic), and teaching children to blend sounds to read and segment them to spell (synthetic).

E.G. the approach set out in the DfE Reading Framework

Validated SSP programme
A complete phonics programme the DfE has checked against its core criteria and added to its published list.

E.G. schools use the DfE list when choosing a programme

Phonics screening check
A statutory check in June of Year 1. Children read 40 words to a teacher. Those who don't meet the expected standard take it again in Year 2.

E.G. 40 words | 20 real | 20 pseudo-words

Phases
"Phase 1–6" labels come from Letters and Sounds (2007), which the DfE removed from its validated list in 2021. Many programmes now use their own stage names.

E.G. you may still hear "Phase 3 sounds"

What an EYFS and phonics course usually covers

- The EYFS framework, areas of learning and ELGs
- Early reading with decodable books
- Observing and assessing progress
- How SSP is taught: GPCs, blending, segmenting
- Early writing and letter formation
- Working with parents and carers

D EYFS terms

EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage)
The statutory framework for learning, development and care for children from birth to 5 in England, including Reception.

E.G. updated framework from 1 September 2026; learning and development rules unchanged

Early Learning Goals (ELGs)
17 goals describing the level children are expected to reach by the end of Reception.

E.G. Word Reading ELG: "Say a sound for each letter in the alphabet and at least 10 digraphs."

Prime and specific areas
The 7 areas of learning. Phonics sits in Literacy, built on strong communication and language.

PRIME Communication and language · Physical development · Personal, social and emotional development

SPECIFIC Literacy · Mathematics · Understanding the world · Expressive arts and design

EYFS Profile
The end-of-Reception assessment against the 17 ELGs, completed by 30 June. For each goal, a child is judged "expected" or "emerging".

E.G. results go to parents and the Year 1 teacher

Characteristics of effective teaching and learning
How children learn: playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically.

E.G. keeping on trying with a tricky word is active learning

Development Matters and Birth to 5 Matters
Non-statutory guidance that helps settings plan their curriculum. Development Matters is from the DfE; Birth to 5 Matters is written by the early years sector.

Key person
The named practitioner each child must be assigned, who helps them settle and works closely with their parents or carers.

Full and relevant qualification
A level 2 or level 3 early years qualification approved by the DfE. Staff need one to count in the EYFS staff:child ratios at that level.

E.G. check one with the DfE's Check an early years qualification service

Phonics in the Writing ELG
"Spell words by identifying sounds in them and representing the sounds with a letter or letters."

READY TO GO FURTHER?

EYFS and Phonics Teaching Diploma

An online course from One Education. Check the course page for the current price, topics and certificate options.

A CPD certificate isn't usually a full and relevant early years qualification.

View the course →

Compare EYFS courses

Official sources and useful links

The reading framework →
DfE guidance on teaching early reading, including SSP

EYFS statutory framework →
Early years rules in England from September 2026

List of phonics teaching programmes →
The DfE's list of validated SSP programmes

Check an early years qualification →
See whether a qualification is approved as full and relevant

Definitions checked against these DfE sources. Terms as used in England. Updated November 2026.