

A review of Ehri's position on onset and rime and orthographic mapping

by Dr Sharon McMurray MBE

August 2026

Ehri, L. (2022) What Teachers Need to Know and Do to Teach Letter–Sounds, Phonemic Awareness, Word Reading, and Phonics. *The Reading Teacher*. Vol. 76 No. 1 July/August 2022

EHRI'S POSITION

In this paper Ehri makes it clear that onset and rime should not be taught first, and should not replace early instruction in individual grapheme–phoneme correspondences. She advises that onset-rime is a larger-unit strategy utilised once children have a strong foundation in letter-sound decoding. She does not advise against using onset and rime as implied in the presentation slide by Dr Buckingham at the DE conference on 9th December 2025.

HOW TO READ THIS DOCUMENT

Gold panels provide links to practice or further advice and guidance. The pink panel recommends further reading to develop fuller understanding. Everything in plain text is a report of Ehri's own position.

● Ehri (2020)

In Ehri's 2020 peer reviewed paper she clearly states that,

'Not only beginning reading but also more advanced reading benefits from systematic phonics instruction focused on teaching multiletter units to decode words. To move into the consolidated alphabetic phase, students need to be taught spellings units that include onset-rimes, syllables, and morphemes. Knowledge of these units enables students to decode unfamiliar multisyllabic words and to store these words in memory for sight word reading and spelling'

EHRI (2020), PAGE S56

LINKS TO PRACTICE

Once children learn grapheme–phoneme correspondences (GPCs) they can be taught multi-letter units composed of the grapheme–phoneme correspondences they know. They can consolidate the GPCs into multi-letter units that can be used to decode words using onsets, rimes and syllables.

• Ehri (2024)

Ehri (2024) again reinforces the importance of the ability to recognise spelling patterns such as “bent, tent, spent” (onset and rime) and multi-letter units arising from the phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences children know. The ability to recognise these larger orthographic units is needed for sight word recognition and reading fluency.

ADDED ILLUSTRATION — THE SPELLING PATTERN REFERRED TO ABOVE



The rime stays constant; only the onset changes.

• Orthographic mapping

The DE (2025) Literacy Framework has provided a description and diagram of orthographic mapping that represents the alphabetic element of the process, but not the orthographic element of the process.

LINKS TO PRACTICE

McMurray (2020) distinguished between alphabetic and orthographic knowledge and McMurray et al, (2026) provide evidence that clearly shows that phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence develops alphabetic knowledge (the alphabetic code) but is insufficient for the development of orthographic knowledge. It is essential that children develop the pattern recognition necessary to consolidate these phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences in larger orthographic units.

Indeed, Ehri, (2020) specifically includes onset and rime, syllables and morphemes in this process describing how these orthographic units are consolidated from the phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences they know.

To further develop your understanding of orthographic processing and orthographic mapping, please see a summary discussion on the next page. For fuller understanding read the peer reviewed journal article by McMurray, Morrow and Bower (2026).

In regular orthographies where phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence is one-to-one, alphabetic mapping (the links between phonemes and graphemes) is sufficient for the development of automatic sight word recognition and spelling accuracy, because there are no orthographic choices to be made.

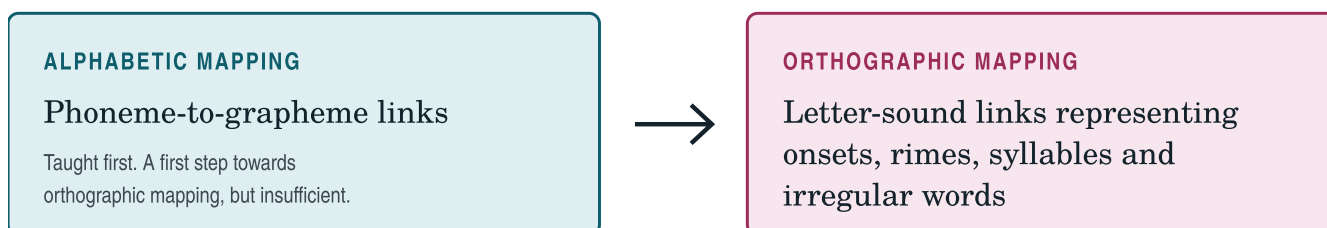
English, however, is a complex orthography with multiple mappings from spelling to sound, and sound to spelling. If only phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences are taught, then the development of orthographic knowledge is dependent upon the child's ability to detect patterns in print at onset and rime and syllable level from implicit learning when reading. Children who have poor orthographic processing cannot do this. Orthographic mapping, therefore, should not be restricted to phoneme to grapheme correspondence but include the linkage between the larger units of sound (onsets, rimes, syllables and words) and their orthographic patterns. Children with the underlying cognitive processing ability to detect and process orthographic knowledge (orthographic patterns) implicitly from reading experience, learn to read easily and fluently, and can abstract the orthographic knowledge needed for spelling accuracy from their reading experience. Whilst there is no doubt that phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence should be taught first and is a first step towards orthographic mapping, it is insufficient.

LINKS TO PRACTICE

McMurray, et al (2026) advise that —

'It is important now that a clear distinction is made between alphabetic mapping (phoneme-to-grapheme links) and orthographic mapping (letter-sound links representing onsets, rimes, syllables and irregular words)' P17.

ADDED ILLUSTRATION — THE DISTINCTION DESCRIBED ABOVE



Larger orthographic units are consolidated from the phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences children already know.
Recognising them is needed for sight word recognition and reading fluency.

● References

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