

# SSP: Problematic Strategies

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## Taking each phoneme in turn all through the word

- Children with good orthographic processing pick up spelling patterns (onsets, rimes and syllables) implicitly from reading, e.g. **night, right, bright, fight, light**, and so read and spell fluently.
- Children with orthographic processing difficulties cannot group phonemes into larger patterns without explicit teaching. Taught only at the alphabetic level, they get stuck decoding and encoding every word phoneme-by-phoneme.
- The DfE core phonics criteria specify that onsets and rimes should not be taught, yet research shows orthographic patterns are essential for reading fluency and spelling accuracy (Ehri, 2020, 2024; McMurray, 2020; McMurray, Morrow and Bower, 2026).

## The alphabetic code guessing game

- Many letters represent more than one sound (**bow** on a dress/**bow** of a ship). Without context or rime knowledge, children have to guess the correct pronunciation.
- Vowel pronunciations are more stable within rimes than when individual vowel graphemes are considered in isolation (Adams, 1990).
- The difficulty children experience when attempting to decode irregular words phoneme-by-phoneme has led to the development of strategies such as mispronunciation correction (Colenbrander et al., 2022).

## Why blending is difficult

- Said one at a time, phonemes sound nothing like the word: the phonemes c-a-t do not sound like 'cat'.
- Where blending appears to be successful, this may be because the teacher supplies the word and the child can draw on orthographic and semantic knowledge to support word recognition, rather than relying on phoneme-by-phoneme blending alone.
- Blending is limited by working memory (Alloway, 2011), and a class of 7-year-olds is likely to show a six-year range in working memory capacity (Gathercole and Alloway, 2008):

**1 item**

in working memory at 5  
years of age

**2 items**

in working memory at 7  
years of age

**3 items**

in working memory at 10  
years of age

**52%**

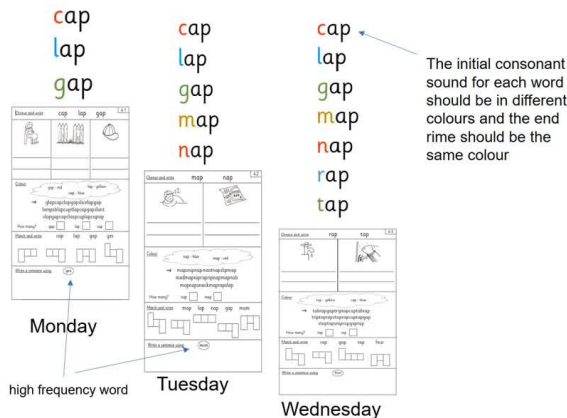
of syllables in English have  
more than 3 phonemes

## Onset and rime – without having to blend

- Identifying the **onset and rime** reduces blending to two units, which is within the working memory capacity of most 7-year-olds.
- Children with poor working memory or dyslexia may still not manage two units, so do not split the word. Instead, build the rime pattern through **spelling** over several days, as in the example overleaf (5 to 6-year-olds, Year 2).

## How to teach children to use onset and rime without having to blend

- When teaching onset and rime do not break/segment the word into two separate units as children with very poor working memory and children with dyslexia who have difficulty unitizing sounds, cannot blend two units together
- Learning to spell provides a very effective way for teaching onset and rime patterns enhancing the development of orthographic knowledge
- The onset and rime pattern is built up over three days as seen here



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## 'Tricky' words and whole word reading

- Children trained only to identify phonemes cannot tell when a word is tricky. Those who succeed do so because of good orthographic processing, not phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences alone.
- Learning a small sight vocabulary of up to 50 words as whole words is the most efficient starting point when learning to read, and provides anchors for learning phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences (Gough and Hillinger, 1980; Vousden et al., 2011; McMurray et al., 2023). This is not 'whole shape' reading (Dehaene, 2013).

## The advanced code

- Choosing between alternative spellings for a sound is only possible if the word is already in memory, so the advanced code confuses children with orthographic processing difficulties and contributes to phonologically plausible but incorrect spelling.

## Letter names

- 23 of the 26 letter names contain a cue to a sound the letter represents, and names are stable labels while sounds vary (c in cat and circle). There is no evidence for teaching sounds before names.
- Teach spelling using letter names from the very beginning, with sounds as a supporting strategy.

### How better learning outcomes can be achieved

- Teach common initial consonant blends (br, cl, st...) as soon as the consonant phonemes are known, before vowel sounds.
- Teach vowel sounds within spelling patterns that are consistent in sound and spelling.
- Use spelling to teach phonemic, orthographic and morphemic knowledge together from 5–8 years (The CSP Spelling and Language Programme, Stages 1–3 research findings:  $p < 0.0001$ , effect size 1.19; Lavan and Talcott, 2021).
- Orthographic pattern interventions benefit children with, and at risk of, dyslexia (Squires and Wolter, 2016).

Full references and further detail are in the full leaflet, SSP: Problematic Strategies.