

Synthetic Phonics

Synthetic Phonics has nothing to do with being artificial. The word 'synthetic' is related to the word 'synthesise', which means to blend.

Characteristics of a Synthetic Phonics Program:

- Letter-sound correspondences are explicitly taught before children begin to read text containing these correspondences.
- Children are taught how these sounds can be 'blended' together to form many words.
- Blending is taught as the first and main strategy for reading unknown words.
- Letter-sound correspondences are typically taught at a rate of around two to eight a week until letter-sound correspondences for the 44 phonemes of English are learned. The rate may be changed for specific children.
- Sounds are taught in all positions of the words and the emphasis is on all-through-the-word segmenting and blending.
- Reading and spelling are taught side by side so that children understand that the alphabet code is reversible (decoding and encoding).
- Discrete lessons are used in instruction. Students are typically taught reading and spelling for around 30 minutes then given follow-up activities for application and reinforcement of skills (including handwriting) later in the day, with provision made for catch-up and extension.
- Synthetic Phonics develops phonemic awareness along with letter-sound correspondence. The process of learning Grapheme Phoneme Correspondences (GPCs) makes the phonemes explicit.
- Letter names are only taught when children need to learn two letter and three letter graphemes, as they need the vocabulary to refer to the letters making the grapheme. e.g. 'c' and 'h' together can represent /ch/.
- Phonics is taught at the level of the individual phoneme from the outset, NOT consonant blends or onset and rhyme.
- Students are moved through 'levels' of the alphabet code, from the simple to the complex, in a systematic way:
 - A phoneme can be represented by one grapheme e.g. 'c' for /k/.
 - A phoneme can be represented by two to four graphemes e.g. 'ck' for /k/.
 - A phoneme can be represented in multiple ways e.g. ay, ai, a, a-e, aigh, eigh.
 - A spelling choice can represent more than one phoneme e.g. great, clean, bread.
- Over-reliance on visual memory is regarded as limiting so students need to learn 'by sight' only a small number of irregular, high-frequency words.

- Irregular words and more tricky words are introduced slowly and systematically. The teacher starts with what is known and draws attention to the 'tricky bit'.
- Children are provided with plenty of phonetically decodable reading material to practise sounding out and blending – first single words, followed by short sentences, then decodable stories.
- Use of pictures and context are made for reading and spelling of homophones and to help with the meaning of words once they have been successfully decoded.
- Students read and spell nonsense words as well as real words to ensure that they are using phonics skills rather than visual memory. They are taught to think about whether what they have decoded or encoded makes sense or not.
- In spelling, the emphasis is on hearing the sounds in sequence through the word rather than 'look, cover, write, check'. However this visual strategy plays a larger part with unusual spellings and spelling variations.
- Letter sequences forming 'chunks' such as 'tion' are taught in the latter part of spelling instruction.
- Invented spelling is corrected selectively and sensitively so that it does not become over-learned.
- Dictation is a regularly-used teaching technique from letter level to word spelling, and eventually sentences.
- Lessons are cumulative, with each lesson building on the one before it.
- The aim is zero reading failure so any struggling students are identified from day one, lesson one and given small amounts of additional teaching/practice.
- Teachers value accuracy above speed. Fluency (i.e. speed, accuracy, expression, and comprehension) will come with time, but the child's understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds is the all-important first step.
- Teachers read a range of literature with the children and ensure that all children experience activities associated with literacy such as role play, drama and poetry, but the children are not expected to 'read' text, which is beyond them. The focus here is on comprehension and enjoyment.
- Multisensory activities are used to increase enjoyment and intensify learning.
- Multisensory mnemonics are taught as a means to an end – correct identification of sounds, letters and shapes – as needed.