



Phonics teaching materials: core criteria and the self-assessment process

The department wishes to offer schools and early years settings support in choosing effective systematic synthetic phonics teaching materials. To assist in providing this, the department has published core criteria that define the key features of an effective systematic synthetic phonics teaching programme.

The criteria are not prioritised; they comprise an interdependent core, and a good support programme should meet all of them. The department is strongly encouraging heads and teachers to consider these core criteria when making decisions about the quality of commercial programmes and the suitability of them for their particular schools and settings.

To ensure that this process is as easy and useful as possible for schools and settings, publishers of phonics products were invited to evaluate their materials against each of the revised core criteria and complete a self-assessment form. The self-assessment demonstrates how each of the criteria is met, or explains why a particular criterion is not applicable to the product. Please refer also to the explanatory notes where applicable.

Publishers were asked to provide information that is succinct and focused on the criteria in a form that is easy to read and understand.

Completed entries were independently scrutinised for accuracy.

Completed and verified self-assessments are displayed on this website for schools to browse through before making a decision. It should be noted that the department does not endorse or rank the programmes that appear on this website. Completed evaluation forms should not be regarded or advertised as an 'approved' programme or resource. However, completed forms can be used for the purposes of demonstrating to schools how a programme or resource meets the core criteria and can, for example, be displayed on publishers' websites.

Core criteria

The self-assessment provides information about how a product meets the core criteria for a high quality phonics programme. For detailed information on how a product meets each of the core criteria, please see the completed form.

Core criteria for a systematic synthetic phonics programme
presents high quality systematic, synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print, i.e. a phonics 'first and fast' approach (see note 1)
enables children to start learning phonic knowledge and skills using a systematic, synthetic programme by the age of five, with the expectation that they will be fluent readers having secured word recognition skills by the end of key stage one (see note 2)
is designed for the teaching of discrete, daily sessions progressing from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills and covering the major grapheme/phoneme correspondences (see note 3)
enables children's progress to be assessed (see note 4)
uses a multi-sensory approach so that children learn variously from simultaneous visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities which are designed to secure essential phonic knowledge and skills (see note 5)
demonstrates that phonemes should be blended, in order, from left to right, 'all through the word' for reading
demonstrates how words can be segmented into their constituent phonemes for spelling and that this is the reverse of blending phonemes to read words
ensures that children apply phonic knowledge and skills as their first approach to reading and spelling even if a word is not completely phonically regular
ensures that children are taught high frequency words that do not conform completely to grapheme/phoneme correspondence rules
provides fidelity to the teaching framework for the duration of the programme, to ensure that these irregular words are fully learnt (see note 6)
ensures that, as pupils move through the early stages of acquiring phonics, they are invited to practise by reading texts which are entirely decodable for them, so that they experience success and learn to rely on phonemic strategies (see note 7).

Explanatory notes

1. Phonic work is best understood as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabet works, rather than one of a range of optional 'methods' or 'strategies' for teaching children how to read. For example, phonic programmes should not encourage children to guess words from non-phonetic clues such as pictures before applying phonic knowledge and skills. High quality systematic, synthetic phonic work will make sure that children learn:

- grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence;
- to apply the highly important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes, in order, all through a word to read it;
- to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell; and that
- blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

2. Teachers will make principled, professional judgements about when to start on a systematic, synthetic programme of phonic work but it is reasonable to expect that the great majority of children will be capable of, and benefit from doing so by the age of five. It is equally important for the programme to be designed so that children become fluent readers having secured word recognition skills by the end of key stage one.

3. The programme should introduce a defined initial group of consonants and vowels, enabling children, early on, to read and spell many simple CVC words.

4. If the programme is high quality, systematic and synthetic it will, by design, map incremental progression in phonic knowledge and skills. It should therefore enable teachers to: track children's progress; assess for further learning and identify incipient difficulties, so that appropriate support can be provided.

5. Multi-sensory activities should be interesting and engaging but firmly focused on intensifying the learning associated with its phonic goal. They should avoid taking children down a circuitous route only tenuously linked to the goal. This means avoiding over-elaborate activities that are difficult to manage and take too long to complete, thus distracting the children from concentrating on the learning goal.

6. The programme should not neglect engaging and helpful approaches to the more challenging levels where children have to distinguish between phonically irregular graphemes and phonemes.

7. It is important that texts are of the appropriate level for children to apply and practise the phonic knowledge and skills that they have learnt. Children should not be expected to use strategies such as whole-word recognition and/or cues from context, grammar, or pictures.