

Tricky vowels

Your first grader certainly doesn't need to know this, but there are 18 vowel phonemes — or distinct sounds — in the English language. Why is this important? Because phonemic awareness is an important indicator of how well a child will read within the first two years of school.

This year, your child will be learning how to distinguish between what's known as long and short vowel sounds in one-syllable words — an essential concept. (Here's a way to explain the difference between long and short vowels: when a vowel sounds like its name, it's a long sound: *ape*, *feet*. Short vowels don't sound like their letter: *cat*, *dot*.) Kids will become intimately familiar with that trickiest of vowels, the silent *e* — and how adding an *e* to the end of a word can transform a short vowel into a long one. Tip: play the silent *e* game with your child: What happens if you put an *e* on *hop*? It turns into *hope*!

Breaking the code

First graders learn to recognize the most basic sounds and sound blends (phonemes) they find in one-syllable words. In class, they will be asked to separate — or segment — letters (e.g. *h/a/t*) or common consonant blends (e.g. *st* in *stop*, *pl* in *plate*, *tr* in *tree*), so they really hear how individual sounds come together to make a word. They also need to learn some common combinations of two consonants that make one sound (e.g. *sh* in *shape*, *th* in *this*, *wh* in *what*). First graders will also leap into the world of decoding two-syllable words (e.g. *ap/ple*, *mon/key*) and learn that each syllable contains at least one vowel. Finally, first graders are learning how to read familiar words with new endings, such as *run* becoming *running*, *bird* becoming *birds*, and *play* becoming *played*.

Building vocabulary and word sense

First grade is often when parents start noticing that their child's vocabulary starts to flourish. With this, students are introduced to many irregularly spelled words (e.g. *school*, *people*, *thought*). Some kids learn these words readily, but many struggle with sounding out common unfamiliar endings.

First graders practice language categorization, such as sorting words that are types of food, colors, or clothing, and learn to define words by one or more key attributes (e.g. a duck is a bird that swims, a tiger is a large cat with stripes). They'll learn to use their own experience to understand shades of meaning among similar verbs (e.g. *look*, *peek*, *glance*, *glare*, *scowl*) and between adjectives that differ in intensity (e.g. *large*, *huge*, *gigantic*). Tip: ask your child to act out the difference between *mean*, *fierce*, and *terrifying*.

Your child's teacher will also expect your child to use new words learned from conversations or reading, including employing frequently occurring conjunctions (e.g. *and*, *or*, *so*, *because*) in context. For example: "Let's go to the park *because* I need to play!"

What makes a sentence?

First graders need to learn how to recognize the print features of a sentence. They learn to capitalize the first letter of the first word in a sentence and they learn that sentences always end with punctuation — a period for statements, a question mark for questions, and an exclamation point to convey excitement or urgency.

Exploring fiction and nonfiction

By the end of first grade, your child will know that there are different kinds of books: ones that tell stories and ones that give information about things that are (or were) true. And, since reading stories, poems, and segments on George Washington's early years are each challenging in their own way, your child should practice reading each type of text. Keep in mind this is still first grade, so subjects should remain grade-appropriate — and reading together and getting help along the way is expected.

Building your child's knowledge bank

Kids learn by connecting new ideas and information from every book they read to what they already know. Think of it like using reading comprehension skills to build a knowledge bank: with every poem, story, or passage read, there's a main point, a message, or a key fact (or two) that your child learns. The emphasis here is on thoughtfully relating these new bits of knowledge to your child's life, experiences, and prior knowledge. Being able to remember storylines, recalling key details, and finding information — are positive signs that your child's "banking" knowledge.

All about evidence

“Read like a detective, write like an investigative reporter” is how some experts say children should learn to read and write. For first graders, hunting for evidence means finding — and literally pointing to — answers to questions. To answer “What was Grandpa making for breakfast at the beginning of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs?*” your child should flip through the pages and find the words — or the picture — to point out the answer.

Your child’s teacher will emphasize evidence in different ways this year, but the main skills your child should have include:

- Asking and answering questions about both the main point and key details in books and showing exactly where those answers show up in the text or illustrations.
- Figuring out a book’s one or two biggest ideas and using the text or images to show how the author conveys these ideas.
- Naming the reasons an author gives to support her points — and pointing those reasons out in the text or pictures.