

# Six Steps to start with Sound Walls



stephanie stollar consulting

# What is a Sound Wall?

Sound walls are charts in primary classrooms that display the 44 sounds of spoken English by manner and place of articulation in the mouth. Picture cards represent what the mouth looks like when making each sound or phoneme. A picture of a keyword that represents each sound is placed with or on the picture of the mouth. As students learn the graphemes that represent each sound, printed words can be added to the wall. For example, the sound /a/ could be represented with a picture of an apple and the printed word “apple”. The purpose of a sound wall is to provide scaffolded support for young children to make speech sounds concrete for supporting reading and spelling.

Many educators are familiar with organizing printed words alphabetically on word walls. The concept of moving from a word wall to a sound wall may be overwhelming at first. The following six steps were created after reading several blogs and viewing several webinars on sound walls. The intent is to break down the process of implementing a sound wall into manageable steps.



What is your goal for implementing a sound wall? \_\_\_\_\_

---

Do you currently have a word wall in your classroom? \_\_\_\_\_  
If so, how is it used by you and by your students? \_\_\_\_\_

---

# **Step 1:**

## **Understand the Speech to Print Basis of Reading**

**If you have a solid foundation in this knowledge, skip to Step 2.**

**If you aren't sure, check your readiness with these 5 questions.**

**(Answers can be found on the last page).**

**What is the difference between phonemes and graphemes?**

**What is the difference between consonants and vowels?**

**What is the second sound in the word “queen”?**

**What two sounds are represented by the letter X?**

**What is the voiced pair to the sound /t/?**

**Reading is a language-based skill. To become readers, students must map speech to print. When we read, we are not reading words, we are reading representations of speech sounds. The brains of readers are connecting oral language to the visual image of letters and to the meaning of words. To help students become readers, we must teach them about sounds in spoken language (phonemes) and then teach them letters or groups of letters (graphemes).**

Phonological awareness is an essential building block of reading. Students who can segment phonemes in spoken words are more likely to be readers. Older struggling readers are often missing this skill. You may have experienced students who struggle to learn phonics, which is often due to a lack of phonological awareness. While there is a progression of phonological and phonemic awareness skills from easier to harder (see insert), the essential skills are putting individual sounds together into whole words (phoneme blending) and taking apart spoken words into individual phonemes (phoneme segmentation). Although there are more difficult phonemic proficiency skills that need to be taught in grades 1 and 2, students who can blend and segment by the end of kindergarten are more likely to be readers than those who can't.



- Blending & Segmenting Syllables**
- Alliteration**
- Blending & Segmenting Onset-Rime**
- Blending Phonemes**
- Segmenting Phonemes**
- Substituting Phonemes**
- Manipulating Phonemes**

Phoneme proficiency involves advanced skills such as phoneme deletion, substitution, and manipulation. These skills are thought to support instant recognition of words by “sight” after they have been decoded. Once a word is “mapped” so that the exact letter sequence, pronunciation, and meaning are linked together in your brain, you can’t suppress the instant reading of it when you see it in print. It is believed that this “orthographic mapping” ability helps students read at a level of fluency that supports comprehension, attack unfamiliar multi-syllable words, and to learn new words through independent reading. Automatic word reading is closely related to reading comprehension.

**RESOURCE:**

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THE BRAIN LEARNS  
TO READ,  
WATCH THIS VIDEO  
BY STANISLAS DAHAENE  
[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=25GI3-KlD0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25GI3-KlD0)

**RESOURCE:**

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS  
AS AN ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCK OF READING  
READ THIS ARTICLE ON  
THE READING ROCKETS WEBSITE  
[HTTPS://WWW.READINGROCKETS.ORG/ARTICLE/PHONEMIC-AWARENESS-YOUNG-CHILD](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/phonemic-awareness-young-child)

How much time do you spend  
each day teaching or reviewing  
phonological or phonemic  
awareness?

---

---

Think about your  
phonics and  
spelling  
instruction.

What opportuni-  
ties are available  
for practicing  
previously  
taught skills in  
decodable text?

---

---

---

How do you assess phonological or  
phonemic awareness?

---

---

How do you group based on the  
data?

---

---

---

**RESOURCE:**

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ORTHOGRAPHIC MAPPING,  
WATCH THIS VIDEO BY DAVID KILPATRICK  
[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=OPnIIIn5JuIE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPnIIIn5JuIE)



## Step 2: Learn What is Problematic About a Word Wall

Word walls are problematic for a number of reasons. Fundamentally, they emphasize what words look like, not what they sound like. Word walls often support instruction of “high frequency” or “sight words” in a way that relies on rote memorization and doesn’t support orthographic mapping. These practices are based in the faulty belief that reading is about visual memory. Word walls often include an outline around the word which is intended to cue the student to the visual shape of the word on the page. There is no research evidence to support reading as a visual memory task. Word walls are often organized alphabetically by first letter, not sound. This can result in confusing students by placing words like “the” under the letter “T” or the word “eye” under the letter “E”. These practices focus student attention on the visual features of the printed word and distract from the essentially important sounds in the word. In fact, organizing a word wall in this way requires students to already know how a word is spelled, thus defeating the goal of supporting spelling.

If you use a word wall, reflect on the points above and what you might consider changing.

---

---

---

If you don't use a word wall, go to Step 3

How do you teach phonological and phonemic awareness? How much time do you spend each week? Each day?

---

---

---

## Step 3: Plan Instruction

### Include a clear sequence of phonological awareness instruction:

Because reading is based on speech, reading instruction should begin with drawing attention to the sounds in spoken words. Children must learn to deconstruct spoken words into their individual phonemes because it is the phonemes that are represented in writing. Students will have less confusion when trying to read and spell if they have intimate knowledge of the sound structure of English.

There are 44 speech sounds in English that can be broken into two categories – consonants and vowels. There are 25 consonant sounds and 19 vowel sounds. Early reading instruction should draw student's attention to speech sounds as articulatory gestures by focusing on what their mouths are doing when they say each of the 44 sounds.

Getting students to work with individual phonemes is essential. Students who struggle to identify, blend and segment phonemes may benefit from learning to blend and segment larger linguistic units such as syllables, compound words, or onset-rime until they get comfortable working with the abstract concept of sounds in words.

### Include a clear sequence of phonics and spelling instruction:

In addition to a clear sequence for phonological awareness, a detailed scope and sequence of phonics skills

will be needed. The sound wall will be used to support the connection from speech to print. As a new phoneme-grapheme correspondence is introduced, an anchor word can be added to the sound wall. This anchor word acts as a reference from phoneme to grapheme and supports accurate spelling and writing. For example, when students are encouraged to refer to the sound wall when they are writing. If they are unsure how to spell a word, they should be prompted to segment the sounds in the word. They can feel what their mouth is doing when they make the sound, identify the manner and place of articulation, find that section of the sound wall, and see the grapheme that represents the sound they want to write.

How do you teach phonological and phonemic awareness?

---

---

How much time do you spend each week? Each day?

---

---

# Rethink Your Approach to “Sight Words”

Rather than teaching students to memorize a list of high frequency or “sight” words, integrate the words into your phonics scope and sequence. Students can be taught to map the regular parts of words like “said” and to flex the irregular parts. This will support future accurate retrieval of the word during spelling and when it is seen in print, more so than encouraging students to memorize these words as wholes.

**RESOURCE:** To learn more about teaching irregular words, see Really Great Reading’s Heart Word Magic <https://www.reallygreatreading.com/heart-word-magic>

Do you use a clear scope and sequence for phonics?

---

---

Do phonics lessons begin with students speaking the words and segmenting the phonemes?

---

---

Are there regular and irregular words on the list?

---

---

What has been your approach to teaching irregular words?

---

---

---

Is your spelling instruction integrated with your phonics instruction?

---

Do you have a list of high frequency words students need to learn by the end of the year?

---

---

What materials will you need for implementing sound walls?

---

---

---

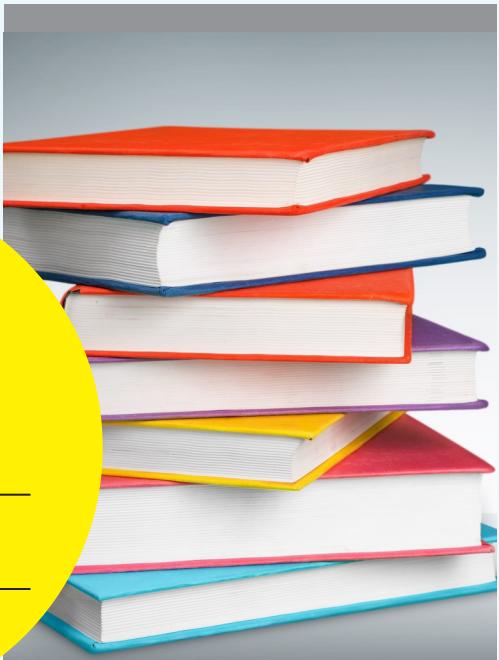
# Use consistent Instructional Routines

Sound Box Strips

Which elements of effective instructional routines mentioned below are you consistently using?

---

---



**The connections between speech, reading, and writing can be enhanced with an explicit instructional routine for whole group and small group instruction that starts with orally saying the word and identifying the number of sounds. Sound box strips (Elkonin boxes) can be used to make the concept of sounds in words concrete. Letters eventually replace chips or other markers to represent each sound in the boxes. Students can be encouraged to write the letters and then the whole word. The newly mapped word can be read repeatedly in isolation, in phrases, in sentences and in controlled decodable books to support the level of automaticity that leads to reading comprehension.**

## Step 4:

## Gather Materials and Post Your Sound Wall

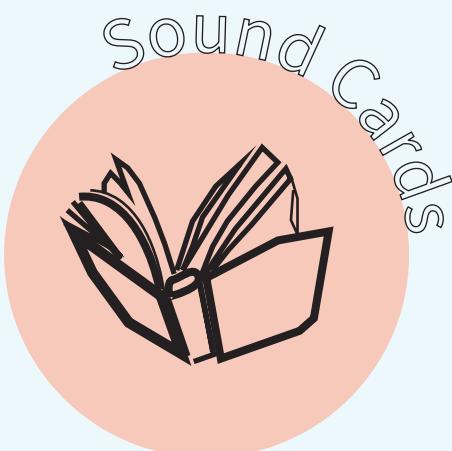
The purpose of a sound wall is to provide scaffolded support for young children to make speech sounds concrete and provide a reference for recalling how to represent the sounds in print. Sound walls include a card for each of the 44 sounds organized by manner and place of articulation in the mouth. Two sound walls are used in primary classrooms – one for the consonant sounds and one for the vowel sounds. Each card includes a picture of what your mouth does when making the sound, which can help students remember the sound and how it can be represented in print. Sound cards can be purchased. Some core reading programs include sound cards. Consider taking pictures of your students' mouths to use on your sound wall. Accurate photos of students making the articulatory gestures can increase the ownership the students feel in being a part of their classroom sound wall. However you obtain the sound card, it is important that the cards represent pure the production of each sound.

The consonant sound cards are arranged on a sound wall from left to right and top to bottom, according to where the sound is made in your mouth, what your lips are doing, and where your tongue is placed when you make each sound. As you move from left to right on the wall, the “place” in your mouth where the sound is produced moves from the front to the back of the mouth.

The sounds are grouped in the categories stops, nasals, fricatives, affricates, glides and liquids, with the voiced and unvoiced pairs listed together. Instruction often moves from the top to the bottom of the chart.

The vowel sound cards typically are organized on a sound wall based on the openness of the jaw and the tongue height and placement. This has become known as the “vowel valley” due to the listing of the sounds in order from left to right based on position in the mouth and top to bottom based on the openness of the jaw. The schwa sound is often listed somewhat in the center of the valley, and the diphthongs and vowel-r combinations are often listed on the side.

It can be helpful to provide each child a handheld mirror so they can see what their mouth is doing when they produce different sounds. And hanging a floor-length mirror horizontally below your sound wall allows several children to sit on the floor next to each other and see themselves practicing sounds.





## **Step 5: Get Started and Get Support**

Teachers who have implemented sound walls in their classrooms suggest that you simply get started. Don't wait until you have all of the background information or until you can purchase materials. Start with what you have, even if that means making modifications to an existing word wall. See if there is another teacher in your school who also wants to try a sound wall, so you can support each other. Consult your school's Speech Language Pathologist. SLPs have excellent knowledge of phonetics and how to support students to attend to the way sounds are produced.

Who else in your school or district might be interested in implementing a sound wall?

---

---

---

Do you have a  
Speech Language Pathologist  
you could contact?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Step 6: Try It

- a). Starting in the beginning of kindergarten, draw students' attention to the sounds in spoken language. Once students are able to isolate individual phonemes, teach and practice articulating each sound while drawing attention to what your mouth is doing when you make each sound. Students can use mirrors and look at each other's mouths. The focus is on speaking the words and sounds. There is no print at first. Spend 2-3 weeks introducing all 44 sounds, with their articulator features, as you reference the cards placed on the sound wall. It also can be helpful to teach a gesture to go with the vowel sounds. These scaffolds may help students learn the abstract concept of phonemes.
- b). Introduce the sounds from left to right and top to bottom on the consonant chart.
- c). Students can practice blending and segmenting sounds in spoken words.

d). Review and discuss the sounds daily. As you engage in phonemic awareness activities, refer to the sound cards on the sound wall.

Prompt students to use the sound wall when they are writing.

e). Teach one phoneme-grapheme relationship at a time. As a new grapheme is taught, add a printed word that starts with that sound next to the keyword and mouth picture on the sound wall. All sounds can appear on the sound wall from the beginning, but graphemes are added only after the sound-print combination has been explicitly taught within the phonics scope and sequence.

f). Teach students to blend letter sounds together to read CVC words. Provide multiple opportunities to practice reading the new words in text and in activities such as word chaining.



What are your  
next steps?

---

---

---

## Answers to Readiness Questions

5. What is the voiced pair to the sound /t/? /d/

4. What two sounds are represented by the letter X? /k/ and /s/

3. What is the second sound in the word "queen"? /w/

obstruction of the air flow by the teeth, lips or tongue.

that is the nucleus of every syllable and is classified by tongue position and height (low/high; front/mid/back). A consonant is a phoneme that is not a vowel and is formed with that is the difference between consonants and vowels? A vowel is an open phoneme

bination that spells a single phoneme. A grapheme may be one, two, three or four letters. unit of speech. The phonemes in trip are /t/, /r/, /i/. /p/. A grapheme is a letter or letter combination that is the difference between phonemes and graphemes? A phoneme is the smallest

## Steps for Introducing a Sound/Spelling Card\*

1. Hold up the sound-spelling card. Tell the students the name of the picture. For example, “ball”.
2. Restate the name of the card. Say the first sound in the name. /b/ /b/ /b/
3. Have the students repeat the sound 3 times as you point to the picture. Say “sound?” and let them respond.
4. Point to the spelling and name the grapheme. “B”
5. Repeat the sound and give the name of the spelling /b/ “B”
6. Write the spelling. Have the students write the spelling in the air, on their palms, and say the sound as they write the spelling. Or, have the students practice writing on their whiteboards.

## Sample Script\*

Say: Today we are going to learn a new sound and its spelling.

T: Hold up the sound-spelling card

Say: This picture is a ball. What is the picture?

S: Ball

Say: Ball. This is the ball card. The first sound in the word ball is /b/. /b/. Say the sound again.

S: /b/

Say: Once more.

S: /b/

Say: The way we spell the /b/ sound is \_\_\_\_\_.

T: Point to the appropriate spelling you are teaching.

Say: I want you to make the /b/ sound each time I touch the spelling on the card.

T: Touch spelling

S: /b/

T: Touch spelling

S: /b/

Say: This is how we write the sound for /b/.

T: Write the spelling of the /b/ sound

Say: Now you write the spelling of the /b/ sound in the air (or on your hand or on the white board) and say the sound.

\* Adapted from the work of Dr. Mary Dahlgren

## **Resources:**

### 1. Photos of Sound Walls

<https://padlet.com/pkastner/eml6pu1mp8d>

### 2. Mary Dahlgren is a national expert on sound walls. Her company, Tools 4 Reading, offers instructional materials for teaching sound-spelling relationships and for posting a sound wall.

<https://www.tools4reading.com/sound-walls>

Dr. Dahlgren wrote a helpful blog on sound walls for Voyager Sopris Learning.

<https://www.voyagersopris.com/blog/edview360/2020/05/20/implementing-a-sound-wall>

A recording of Dr. Dahlgren presenting a workshop for the Ohio Department of Education can be found at the link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxV4Rq1F00M&list=PLDB1C5-YOjgJ0NktL05BofewWVAZi3Uu&index=3&t=0s>

### 3. If you need to learn more about the language structures of reading, read Louis Moats' book Speech to Print.

<https://products.brookespublishing.com/Speech-to-Print-P1167.aspx>

Or read Dr. Moats' articles.

[https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ae\\_spring1998\\_teachingdecoding.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ae_spring1998_teachingdecoding.pdf)

<https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Moats.pdf>

### 4. Dawn Durham, from Pennsylvania's technical assistance team, presented on sound walls at The Reading League Conference.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rvmyyx0-kek>

### 5. Dr. Pam Kastner, also from PaTTAN, has compiled many useful resources on sound walls.

<https://padlet.com/pkastner/e5lfjtkxnkjlyxra>

Dr. Kastner hosted a webinar with several educators who are implementing sound walls.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zge4XhjVBpk&feature=youtu>.





Reading Science Academy™