

Consonant Pairs to Teach Similar Sounds

Many students will benefit from continued instruction on phoneme awareness, including older students who struggle when decoding and spelling words. The tables below provide important information about articulation for teachers to understand and incorporate into instruction.

Consonant Pairs

Some students confuse sounds in words. They may mispronounce words or switch sounds during spelling. For these kids, learning the consonants in pairs can help. The sounds in each pair are formed the same way in the mouth, but they differ in that one sound is voiced and the other is unvoiced. A voiced phoneme, like /d/, is made with the vocal cords engaged. If you put your finger on your throat while making this kind of sound, you will feel a vibration. For an unvoiced phoneme, the vocal cords are not engaged and there is no vibration.

Teachers can talk about the pairs when they're correcting students during spelling. Here's an example of what that looks like. A student spells *ever* as *efer*, confusing the very similar consonant phonemes. As the teacher, you should:

1. First, pronounce the word with the student. Point out the confused phoneme in the word and compare it with the correct phoneme.
2. Next, have the student segment all the sounds in the word, pronouncing the trouble sound correctly.
3. Finally, have the student re-spell the word.

/p/ pet, unvoiced

/b/ butter, voiced

These sounds are called Lip Poppers. To make these sounds, your lips come together and then pop open with a burst of air. They are stop sounds.

/sh/ ship, unvoiced

/zh/ measure, voiced

These sounds are called Long Lip Pushers. To make them, your lips pucker and push out air. They are continuous sounds.

/f/ fuzz, unvoiced

/v/ vest, voiced

These sounds are called Lip Biters. To make them, your lower lip is curled in and the top teeth go over the bottom lip. A steady stream of air is released. They are continuous sounds.

/s/ smile, unvoiced

/z/ zipper, voiced

These sounds are called Tongue in the Cage. To make them, your lips are wide and slightly apart. The teeth stay together; the tongue is encaged behind them. They are continuous sounds.

/th/ think, unvoiced

/th/ them, voiced

These sounds are called Tongue Biters. To make them, your top teeth bite down on the tongue and the tongue comes out. Air is pushed around the tongue. They are continuous sounds.

/ch/ chair, unvoiced

/j/ judge, voiced

These sounds are called Quick Lip Pushers. To make them, your lips pucker quickly and the tongue taps the roof of the mouth. They are stop sounds.

/t/ tiger, unvoiced

/d/ desk, voiced

These sounds are called Tongue Tappers. To make them, your mouth is partly open and the tongue taps the ridge behind the top teeth. They are stop sounds.

/k/ kite, unvoiced

/g/ goat, voiced

These sounds are called Throat Sounds. To make them, your mouth is open and the back of the tongue touches the back of the mouth near the throat. They are stop sounds.

Consonant Pairs to Teach Similar Sounds

Nasal Sounds

These sounds travel through the nose. Fun fact: If you pinch your nose, these sounds stop immediately! These nasal sounds can have an impact on the vowel that comes before them. For example, in the letter combinations 'am', 'an', and 'ang', the 'a' no longer makes the true short 'a' sound because the vowel sound is distorted by the nasal consonant sound. These sounds are continuous.

/m/ mouse, voiced	/n/ nose, voiced	/ng/ sang, voiced
The lips come together and the tongue is in the center of the mouth. The sound travels through the nose.	The tongue touches the ridge behind the top teeth. The sound travels through the nose.	The back of the tongue is lifted in the back of the mouth near the throat, closing off airflow so the air travels through the nose.

Liquid Sounds

/l/ lion, voiced	/r/ rose, voiced
The sounds /l/ and /r/ can be very tricky for students to produce and isolate. We say they are liquid sounds, changing mouth positions based on the word. Some teachers call these sounds tongue lifters because the tongue tip or back of the tongue lifts up to make them. These sounds are continuous.	

Glide Sounds

The consonant sounds /y/, /wh/, /w/, and /h/ are glides, meaning that when we say these phonemes in isolation, we pick up a little of a vowel sound at the end. When we say them in a word, they glide right into the vowel that follows. Try it — *yellow, wheel, water, hot*.

The sounds /wh/ and /w/ are consonant pairs. American English typically voices the /wh/ sound — say *whether*. But in British English, /wh/ is unvoiced. Say *whether* again. Do you voice the first sound or not? Whether you voice /wh/ or not, use this distinction to help teach the spellings of the two phonemes — /w/ and /wh/.

/y/ yellow, voiced
The tongue is lifted to the roof of the mouth and presses on the upper side teeth. This sound is continuous.

/wh/ whistle, unvoiced	/w/ wagon, voiced
/wh/ and /w/ are consonant pairs. These sounds are called Lip Rounders. To make them, your lips purse in a circular shape and push out air. These sounds are continuous.	

/h/ hand, unvoiced
/h/ is a puff of unvoiced air through a wide open mouth. The push of air helps it glide right into the vowel that follows it. Say <i>happy</i> and feel the glide.
This unvoiced sound is pronounced quickly through the push of air out of the mouth. Be careful not to add a voiced /u/!