

Putting Two Sounds Together With Plastic Letters

This activity is ideal to help the student become accustomed to the idea of putting sounds together, before attempting to read short vowel words. It provides an introduction to oral blending for students who are learning how to read. As students learn to listen for the two sounds within a two-letter chunk, they develop the phonemic awareness skills needed to go on to listen for three sounds in short vowel words. This skill provides the foundation needed for learning to spell words. For students who have already begun studying short vowel words, this is a good exercise to help students make the leap from words that begin with continuous consonants (fan) to words that begin with stopped consonants (can).

Materials

You will need small, lower case alphabet letters. You can use small plastic letters, or you can write letters on small pieces of blank index cards, on small cubes, or on one inch square tiles. Store the letters in a small box or bag. See the link at www.soundcityreading.com for a source for inexpensive plastic letters.

Setting Up the Activity

To set up the activity, select one vowel and about six or eight consonants. The students should know the sounds for all of the letters used. Cut a piece of construction paper in half lengthwise, and place both paper strips in front of the student, one above the other. Put the consonants in a row on the top strip and the vowel on the bottom strip. For example, you might use the vowel *i* and consonants *t*, *h*, *l*, *n*, *w*, and *b*.

To Do the Activity

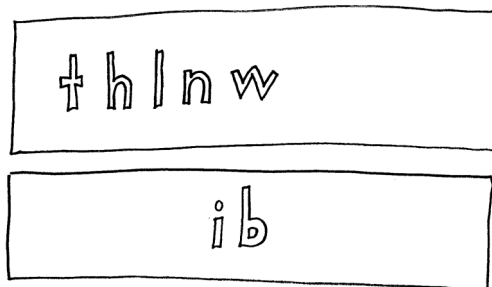
The teacher will dictate several vowel-consonant combinations, such as *it*, *if*, *in*, and then several consonant-vowel combinations, such as *wi*, *hi*, *bi*. Each combination will have two sounds. One sound will be a short vowel sound. The other sound will be a consonant sound. The letter to show the vowel sound will be already in place on the lower strip of construction paper. The students are to listen for the consonant sound, select the correct consonant letter, and put it before or after the vowel, depending on where they heard the sound. Then students pronounce the letter combination orally.

Explain to the student that you will be saying parts of words, not real words. Explain that being able to show these parts with letters will help them learn to spell and read real words.

Here is a typical sequence.

Teacher: "Show me *ib*."

Student: Selects *b* and places it immediately to the right of the *i*, then blends the sounds together from left to right, pronouncing the chunk without a break between sounds: "*ib*."



Teacher: “Show me *il*.”

Student: Puts *b* back in line above the *i*, selects *l*, and places it to the right of *i*. Blends the sounds together from left to right: *il*. (Notice you are not spelling the word *ill*, just the work chunk *il*.)

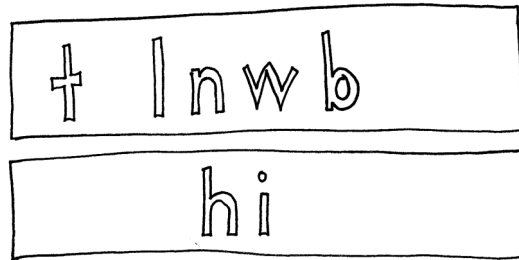
Teacher: “Show me *in*.”

Student: Puts *b* back in line above the *i*, selects *n*, and places it to the right of the *i*. Says *in*. (This just happens to be a real word. The student may or may not notice this.)

Teacher: “Show me *it*.”

The teacher and student continue in the same way until all of the possible vowel-consonant combinations have been done. You won't use *h* or *w* after the *i*, since *ih* and *iw* are difficult to pronounce and these combinations are not normally seen in words. You will use the letters *h* and *w* shortly as beginning sounds are paired with *i*.

Next do the same activity, but this time say letter combinations that have the consonant sound first. Show me *ti*. Show me *bi*, *hi*, *li*, *ni*, etc. The student responds as above, but must listen and recognize that the consonant sound comes first and must be put to the left of the vowel. This not only helps students to hear the separate sounds in word chunks, but also reinforces the left to right progression of sounds within words.



This process of modeling sound combinations and having the student build them with letters while saying them aloud helps develop the important understanding of how to put letter sounds together. Some students learn the alphabet sounds and even learn to say the sounds in words, but they never learn to connect the sounds smoothly enough to recognize the word. For many students, this exercise will work like magic to help them overcome that stumbling block. The secret is that the student is listening to the sound chunk and building it with letters.

Comment: I worked with my niece, Abby, years ago when she was in kindergarten. She had trouble learning her alphabet letters. She couldn't remember which was which and couldn't remember the sounds. I wrote the sound story (available at www.soundcityreading.com) for her, and using posters with the letters and sound pictures, she learned those letters like a pro. But she still could not grasp the concept that the letter sounds could be put together to form meaningful words, no matter what I did. One day, as I was trying to get her to build three letter words with plastic letters with no luck, we invented this activity together. The light bulb went on during the lesson. We continued to practice the two-sound exercise for each of the short vowels, over the next few lessons. From then on she's made steady progress, and went on to make straight A's in first grade. She is now in an Honor's reading class in middle school.

Pronouncing Two Sounds On A Chart

After the student has practiced putting two sounds together using plastic letters, you can do this activity to teach the reverse skill. This activity is more challenging, since the student is going from symbol to sound instead of sound to symbol. The student must look at a pair of letters and say both sounds, sliding the sounds together smoothly.

Materials

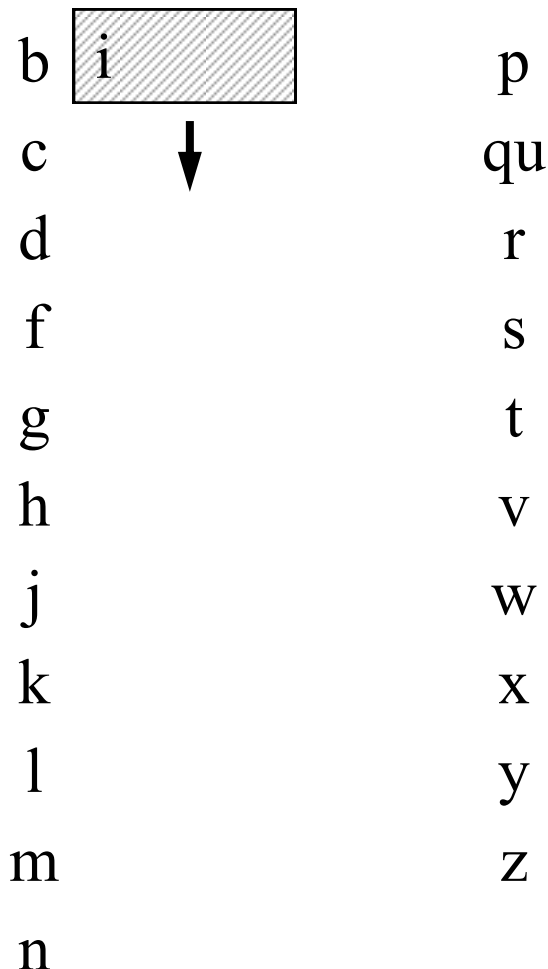
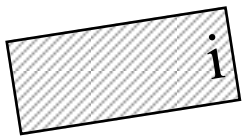
To do this exercise, you can use the sound blending materials available on this site, or create your own.

You'll need two separate cards for each vowel, like the i cards shown below. You will use these cards with two columns of consonants. These materials use large print so they can be used with a group.

Print the two consonant columns on white cardstock. I print the vowels on colored cardstock, using red for a, light green for e, light purple for i, orange for o, light blue for u. Put the two consonant columns on an easel or clip to a pocket chart or chalkboard.

Setting Up the Activity

You will use two vowel cards and the consonant strips. You will hold a vowel card to the right or left of each consonant and move the card down the column.





b

p

c

qu

d

r

f

s

g

t

h

v

j

w

k

x

l

y

m

z

n

To Do the Activity

Take the vowel you want to work with, and slide it down one side of the column. Students will blend the sounds for each letter pair aloud. You can go down the left side first and then the right, or the other way around. If you are using *i* on the left side first, the student would watch carefully as you move the *i* from one letter to the next and say, “ib, ic, id, if, ig, (skip h), ij, ik, il, im, in, ip, (skip qu and r), is, it, iv, (skip w), ix, (skip y), iz.” Then, as you move the other vowel card down the right side of each column, the student would say, “bi, (skip c), di, fi, gi, hi, ji, ki, li, mi, ni, pi, qui, ri, si, ti, vi, wi, (skip x), yi, zi.” After students master the process with one short vowel, you can repeat the process for the other vowels. Remember to use just the short vowel sounds for now.

The task is more difficult for beginners than you might think. Some students catch on quickly, and others find this process quite challenging. If the student does not catch on quickly, don’t give up. If necessary, model each combination for the student by pronouncing it clearly, and have the student repeat. Regular practice will bring more self-assurance for the student. It may take several days of practice before the student is able to put the sounds together independently.

Even though the student is only blending two sounds together, this exercise prepares students to read three letter words. If a student can’t put two letter sounds together, it will be impossible to put three or more sounds together to read a word. This ability to stick letter sounds together to form words when reading, and the reverse ability, to separate the individual sounds in whole words when spelling, is the foundation for developing the ability to decode quickly and confidently.