

Synthetic phonics is widely cited as one of the most effective ways to teach spelling and reading. When you're first getting started with synthetic phonics, you may feel a little overwhelmed by all the new terms you need to learn. The following explanations clarify the essential terms you'll need to understand in order to begin teaching synthetic phonics using Sound Waves.

## Phoneme

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word. The word *at* has two phonemes: /a/ and /t/. The word *chat* has three phonemes: /ch/, /a/ and /t/.

## Grapheme

Graphemes are a letter or letter combination used to represent a phoneme in written form. For example, the graphemes **ch** and **tch** can be used to represent the /ch/ phoneme in **chat** and **catch**. It is important to remember the distinction between phonemes and graphemes, and to use these terms accurately to avoid confusing students.

## Graph/digraph/trigraph/quadgraph

A grapheme can be a single letter or a combination of letters. A single-letter grapheme is called a graph, as in **h**at; a two-letter grapheme is called a digraph, as in **ch**icken; a three-letter grapheme is called a trigraph, as in **bridg**e; and a four-letter grapheme is called a quadgraph, as in **ei**ght. To avoid confusion in the early years, only the term 'grapheme' is used.

## Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is a broad concept that relates to the sound structure of spoken language. It includes understanding phonemes, words, rhyme, syllables, and onset and rime.

## Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness and relates specifically to the working knowledge of the individual phonemes that form the words of spoken Australian English. It incorporates the ability to segment words into their component sounds.

## Synthetic phonics

Synthetic phonics is a method of teaching phonics which involves explicitly and systematically introducing students to phoneme-grapheme relationships. Students are taught how to segment words into individual phonemes, and how to blend (or synthesise) phonemes together to form words.

### Want more?

For research and reports about the effectiveness of synthetic phonics, read the following article: [soundwavesspelling.com.au/syntheticphonics](https://soundwavesspelling.com.au/syntheticphonics). It includes links to key studies from the US (National Reading Panel), the UK (seven-year longitudinal study at Clackmannshire), and Australia (Christensen, Coltheart, and the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy).