

Six Syllable Types



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Learn the six types of syllables found in English orthography, why it's important to teach syllables, and the sequence in which students learn about both spoken and written syllables.

Six written syllable-spelling conventions are used in English spelling. These were regularized by Samuel Webster to justify his 1806 dictionary's division of syllables. The conventions are useful to teach because they help students remember when to double letters in spelling and how to pronounce the vowels in new words. The conventions also help teachers organize decoding and spelling instruction.

Why teach syllables?

Without a strategy for chunking longer words into manageable parts, students may look at a longer word and simply resort to guessing what it is — or altogether skipping it. Familiarity with syllable-spelling conventions helps readers know whether a vowel is long, short, a diphthong, **r**-controlled, or whether endings have been added. Familiarity with syllable patterns helps students to

read longer words accurately and fluently and to solve spelling problems — although knowledge of syllables alone is not sufficient for being a good speller.

Spoken and written syllables are different

Say these word pairs aloud and listen to where the syllable breaks occur:

bridle – riddle table – tatter even – ever

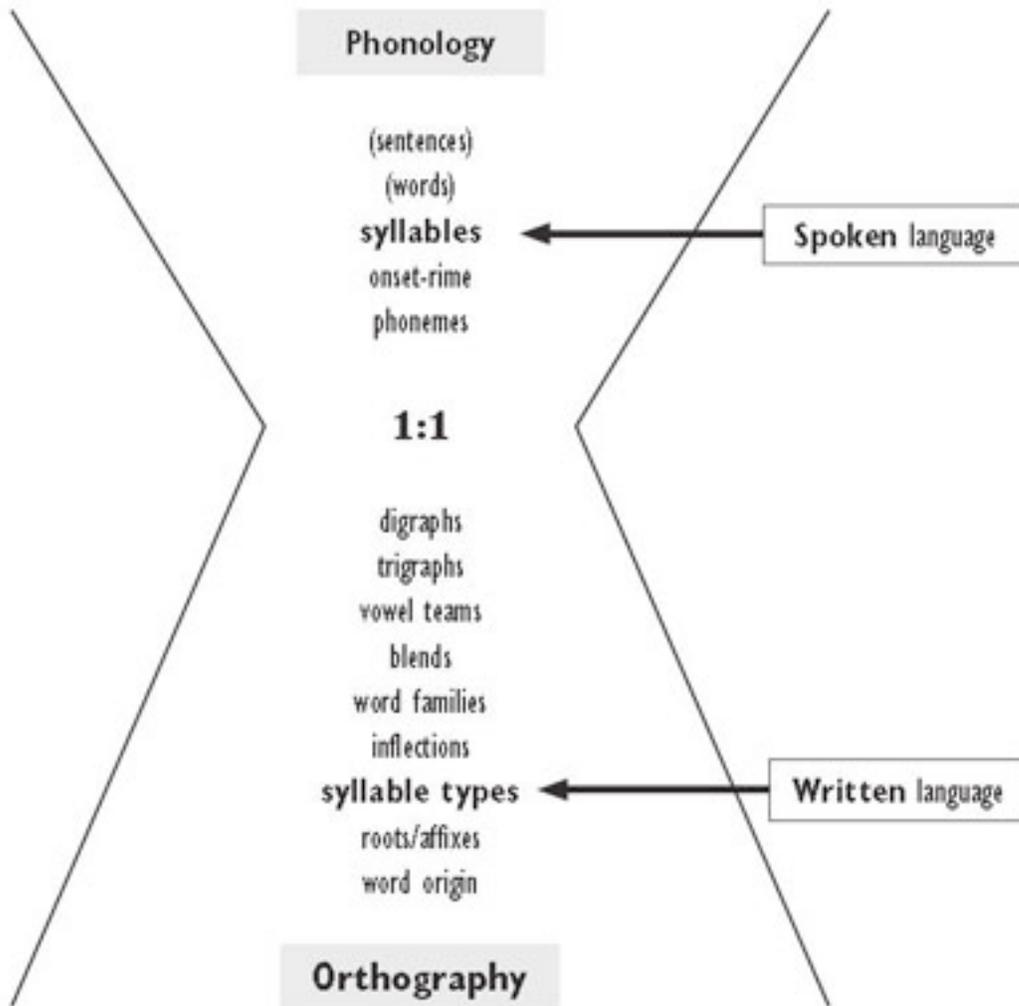
Spoken syllables are organized around a vowel sound. Each word above has two syllables. The jaw drops open when a vowel in a syllable is spoken. Syllables can be counted by putting your hand under your chin and feeling the number of times the jaw drops for a vowel sound.

Spoken syllable divisions often do not coincide with or give the rationale for the conventions of *written* syllables. In the first word pair above, you may naturally divide the spoken syllables of **bridle** between **bri** and **dle** and the spoken syllables of **riddle** between **ri** and **ddle**. Nevertheless, the syllable **rid** is "closed" because it has a short vowel; therefore, it must end with consonant. The first syllable **bri** is "open," because the syllable ends with a long vowel sound. The result of the syllable-combining process leaves a double **d** in **riddle** (a closed syllable plus consonant-**le**) but not in **bridle** (open syllable plus consonant-**le**). These spelling conventions are among many that were invented to help readers decide how to pronounce and spell a printed word.

The hourglass illustrates the chronology or sequence in which students learn about both spoken and written syllables. Segmenting and blending spoken syllables is an early

phonological awareness skill; reading syllable patterns is a more advanced decoding skill, reliant on student mastery of phoneme awareness and phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

Figure 5.1. Hourglass Depiction of the Relationship Between Awareness in Oral Language and Written Syllable Decoding (Contributed by Carol Tolman, and used with permission.)



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Closed syllables

The closed syllable is the most common spelling unit in English; it accounts for just under 50 percent of the syllables in running text. When the vowel of a syllable is short, the syllable will be

closed off by one or more consonants. Therefore, if a closed syllable is connected to another syllable that begins with a consonant, two consonant letters will come between the syllables (**com-mon, but-ter**).

Two or more consonant letters often follow short vowels in closed syllables (**dodge, stretch, back, stuff, doll, mess, jazz**). This is a spelling convention; the extra letters do not represent extra sounds. Each of these example words has only one consonant phoneme at the end of the word. The letters give the short vowel extra protection against the unwanted influence of vowel suffixes (**backing; stuffed; messy**).

Vowel-Consonant-e (VCe) syllables

Also known as "magic **e**" syllable patterns, VCe syllables contain long vowels spelled with a single letter, followed by a single consonant, and a silent **e**. Examples of VCe syllables are found in **wake, whale, while, yoke, yore, rude, and hare**. Every long vowel can be spelled with a VCe pattern, although spelling "long **e**" with VCe is unusual.

Open syllables

If a syllable is open, it will end with a long vowel sound spelled with one vowel letter; there will be no consonant to close it and protect the vowel (**to-tal, ri-val, bi-ble, mo-tor**). Therefore, when syllables are combined, there will be no doubled consonant between an open syllable and one that follows.

A few single-syllable words in English are also open syllables. They include **me, she, he** and **no, so, go**. In Romance languages — especially Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian — open syllables predominate.

Vowel team syllables

A vowel team may be two, three, or four letters; thus, the term vowel digraph is not used. A vowel team can represent a long, short, or diphthong vowel sound. Vowel teams occur most often in old Anglo-Saxon words whose pronunciations have changed over hundreds of years. They must be learned gradually through word sorting and systematic practice. Examples of vowel teams are found in thief, boil, hay, suit, boat, and straw.

Sometimes, consonant letters are used in vowel teams. The letter y is found in ey, ay, oy, and uy, and the letter w is found in ew, aw, and ow. It is not accurate to say that "w can be a vowel," because the letter is working as part of a vowel team to represent a single vowel sound. Other vowel teams that use consonant letters are -augh, -ough, -igh, and the silent -al spelling for /aw/, as in walk.

Vowel-r syllables

We have chosen the term "vowel-**r**" over "r-controlled" because the sequence of letters in this type of syllable is a vowel followed by **r** (**er, ir, ur, ar, or**). Vowel-**r** syllables are numerous, variable, and difficult for students to master; they require continuous review. The /r/ phoneme is elusive for students whose phonological awareness is underdeveloped. Examples of vowel-**r** syllables are found in **perform, ardor, mirror, further, worth,** and **wart**.

Consonant-le (C-le) syllables

Also known as the *stable final syllable*, C-**le** combinations are found only at the ends of words. If a C-**le** syllable is combined with an open syllable — as in **cable, bugle,** or **title** — there is

no doubled consonant. If one is combined with a closed syllable — as in **dabble**, **topple**, or **little** — a double consonant results.

Not every consonant is found in a C-**le** syllable. These are the ones that are used in English:

-ble (bubble)	-fle (rifle)	-stle (whistle)	-cle (cycle)
-gle (bugle)	-tle (whittle)	-ckle (trickle)	-kle (tinkle)
-zle (puzzle)	-dle (riddle)	-ple (quadruple)	

Simple and complex syllables

Closed, open, vowel team, vowel-**r**, and VC**e** syllables can be either simple or complex. A **complex syllable** is any syllable containing a *consonant cluster* (i.e., a sequence of two or three consonant phonemes) spelled with a *consonant blend* before and/or after the vowel. **Simple syllables** have no consonant clusters.

Simple

late
sack
rick
tee
bide

Complex

plate
stack
shrink
tree
blnd

Complex syllables are more difficult for students than simple syllables. Introduce complex syllables after students can handle simple syllables.

Table 5.1. Summary of Six Types of Syllables in English Orthography

Syllable Type	Examples	Definition
Closed	<u>dap</u> -ple <u>hos</u> -tel <u>bev</u> -er-age	A syllable with a short vowel, spelled with a single vowel letter ending in one or more consonants.
Vowel-Consonant-e (VCe)	<u>com</u> -pete <u>des</u> -pite	A syllable with a long vowel, spelled with one vowel + one consonant + silent e.
Open	<u>pro</u> -gram <u>ta</u> -ble <u>re</u> -cent	A syllable that ends with a long vowel sound, spelled with a single vowel letter.
Vowel Team (including diphthongs)	<u>aw</u> -ful <u>train</u> -er <u>con</u> -geal <u>spoil</u> -age	Syllables with long or short vowel spellings that use two to four letters to spell the vowel. Diphthongs ou/ow and oi/oy are included in this category.
Vowel-r (r- controlled)	<u>in</u> -jur-i-ous <u>con</u> -sort <u>char</u> -ter	A syllable with er, ir, or, ar, or ur . Vowel pronunciation often changes before /r/.
Consonant - le (c-le)	<u>drib</u> -ble <u>bea</u> -gle <u>lit</u> -tle	An unaccented final syllable that contains a consonant before /l/, followed by a silent e.
Leftovers: Odd and Schwa syllables	<u>dam</u> -age <u>act</u> -ive <u>na</u> -tion	Usually final, unaccented syllables with odd spellings.

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