



Changes to guidance on the split spelling - September 2024

From September 2024, Sounds-Write will no longer advise the teaching of the split spelling. This document, and the accompanying webinar (which can be found on the Sounds-Write Portal), detail the reasons for this change of approach.

Why are we no longer teaching the split spelling?

The split spelling is a hangover from traditional print-to-sound phonics programmes, in which spellings determine how we pronounce a word. By this logic, the spelling < e > at the end of the word 'home' *tells* us that the < o > is /oe/, rather than /o/. However, in other words such as 'come' and 'some' it doesn't! So, from now on, we've decided to rectify this by following a strictly sound-to-print orientation.

This causes confusion for students, who might ask why it is that the word 'home' is presented as a split spelling, yet the word 'some' isn't? They might also wonder why the < e > spelling at the end of the word 'leave' is not a split spelling.

Fundamentally, traditional phonics programmes have to turn themselves inside out in order to try to explain the many inconsistencies of a print-to-speech approach. On the other hand, sound-print approaches anchor the teaching in the sounds of the language, of which there are around 44 in any accent of English. These 44 sounds don't suddenly change and we don't decide to add another sound or omit one from time to time. The stable number of sounds in the language provides us with an anchor for our teaching - from sound to print.

Another benefit of dropping the split spelling is that we will now be consistently reading and spelling words from left to right across the word, without having to backtrack, as is the case with the split spelling. For example, when a student writes a word with a split spelling, they sometimes write the split spelling and then fill in the gap with the missing spelling instead of writing from left to right.

From a practical point of view, dropping the spelling will make Lesson 6 much more straightforward. Previously, the split spelling occupied a major part of Lesson 6 and it was tricky to learn and master the script. When you teach Lesson 6 now, simply take out Part 2, just as you have always done for teaching those units where there is no split spelling.

What will replace the split spelling?

Nothing will replace the split spelling, but there will be some small changes to the sequence of what we teach.

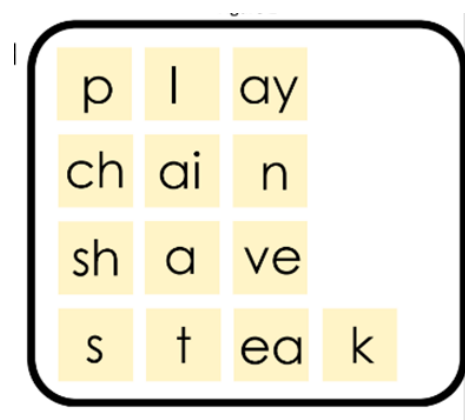
The Initial Code

To facilitate the change, we will now teach the < ve > spelling of /v/ (by far the most common spelling of the sound at the end of single and polysyllabic words) in Unit 11 of the Initial Code. This can be achieved through the teaching of some very common, single-syllable words like 'have', 'live', 'give', 'twelve' and so on.

In all of these words, the spelling < ve > represents the sound /v/. It's another example of an idea students have been absorbing since Unit 7 of the Initial Code: we can spell sounds with two letters. < ve > is another of these two-letter spellings. As practitioners, you can reinforce this conceptual understanding, pointing to the < ve > and saying, "This is /v/. It's two letters but it's just one sound."

Along with some of the other spellings we have introduced in the Initial Code, for example the < k >, < c > and < ck > spellings of /k/ and the < w > and < wh > spelling of /w/, the introduction of the < ve > spelling of /v/ also further underscores the idea that we can spell sounds in more than one way - Concept 3. This will be formalised as they move on to the Bridging Unit at the end of the first year of school, and then again, of course, as they embark on the Extended Code.

The Extended Code



As teaching moves into the Extended Code, instead of teaching the sound /ae/ as a split spelling, teach the spelling < a > as one of the alternative spellings of the sound /ae/, in words such as 'cave', 'wave', 'shave' and so on. The list of spellings taught in Unit 1 will now be < ay >, < ai >, < a > and < ea >.

Similarly, in Unit 4, the list of alternative spellings will now be < o >, < oa > < ow > and < oe >, and so on for all of the units that previously had a split spelling.

As well as those words ending in < ve >, there are many other words which follow the same 'consonant + e' pattern. For example:

/te/ in gate, Kate, late, plate, state

/me/ in game, same, name, frame

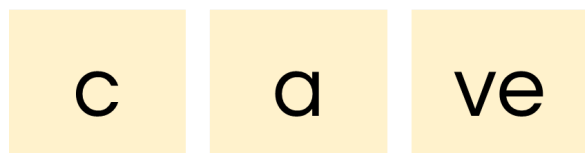
/ke/ in take, cake, shake, quake

/le/ in tale, pale, whale, scale

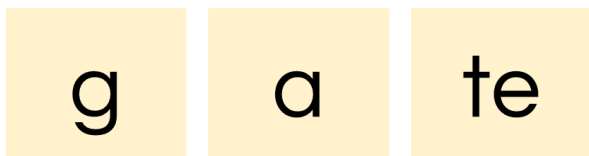
Once we have reinforced what was taught in the Initial Code, by introducing words with < ve > in Unit 1 of the Extended Code, we no longer need to talk about the split spelling and can instead talk about the single letter < a > spelling, along with the various common 'consonant + e' spellings. Just remember to be mindful of cognitive load and introduce these gradually, not all at once!

Whilst the focus of this is always the < a > spelling, in each relevant example, we point out that the spellings < te >, < me >, < ke > and < le > are all two-letter spellings. Students are thoroughly familiar with this concept by now, so they shouldn't have any problems with these new 'consonant + e' spellings.

When teaching Lesson 6 in Unit 1, you will now build 'cave' like this - with the single < a > spelling of /ae/ and then the < ve > spelling of /v/ on one sound card. Students know the spellings for /k/ and /v/, because they have encountered them in the Initial Code, so they can work out that the < a > spells the sound /ae/.



From there, move on to building words with other 'consonant + e' spellings, **remembering not to introduce them all at once!** For example, you will now build 'gate' like this:



Everyone knows that the target sound is /ae/ and, this being Lesson 6, the only sound card with a plausible spelling of /ae/ is < a >. The final sound, /t/ is then on one card and spelled < te >.

Teaching consonant + e is far less likely to cause confusion when students come across words such as 'done', 'come' and 'some', for example, as currently students often default to thinking of them as words containing split spellings because, visually, they look identical.

We also strongly believe that the pattern of consonant + e spellings is very easily correlated to many other consonant + e spellings. Here are some examples:

< **ce** > ice, mice, bounce, service

< **ge** > huge, George, large

< **the** > breathe, soothe

< **ze** > freeze

This is exactly what the cognitive psychologist Mark Seidenberg means when he describes this process as 'bootstrapping' - you get a little bit of information about one thing and then it provides you with a clue about something that's correlated with it.

Of course, it is possible that some students will revert to reading the spelling < a > in words such as 'cave', as /a/. In this case, we simply use our Teaching Through Errors - 'This can be /a/, but in this word, it's /ae/. Say /ae/ here. Say the sounds and read the word.' This, of course, is Concept 4 - a spelling can represent more than one sound, a concept that we're going to be teaching formally throughout the next ten or so units.

We're leaving it up to schools to decide how you want to roll out this change - you may want to completely do away with the split spelling now, or move away from it more gradually. And, if you feel that the split spelling works for your students, then it's also fine to keep teaching it!