The Charts
These charts that represent our alphabet code are important, because at a glance, you can see each 'sound' and all the associated spellings. You will notice that these are all fundamentally common spellings that young children need to be able to read and spell from an early age.

Talking about the sounds and their spellings: using 'Key Words'.

• Because
• When
• We
• We
• The
• Be

Talking about the sounds and their spellings: using 'Key Words'.

• The charts contain keywords to use as spelling examples for each sound. Use these when talking about the sounds and their spellings, for instance, don’t say “bee”, say “It's the /b/ in bag”.
• We do not have a letter of the alphabet that represents the sound /sh/ so we combine the two letters ‘s’ and ‘h’ to represent the sound /sh/ as in ship.
• We can use the letter names ‘ess’ and ‘itch’ if we want to describe these but we can’t say /s/ as in sun and /h/ as in hat because these are separate sounds, instead say, “It’s the /sh/ in ship”.
• When describing a sound that has more than one spelling say "It’s the /a-el/ in coar" or "It’s the /o-e/ in snow”.
• There is a further difficulty in English because the same spelling can often represent more than one sound. For instance, the spelling ‘ow’ can represent the /ow/ in cow but it can also represent the sound /o-e/ in snow. Again, use the key word, say, “It’s the /ow/ in cow”, or “It’s the /o-e/ in snow”.
• Because of this tendency we must always be very careful to show spellings within the context of real words, never floating around on their own where they become meaningless.

‘Exception Words’– Common words with unusual spellings

There are around 100 common words seen frequently in print with unusual spellings. They can be decoded in the usual way, except for the odd spelling pattern(s). No word is spelled so irregularly that all letter patterns are undecodeable. These words are taught within their sound category but are always trickier to learn as the spelling is rare.

A few words belong to small groups. These have been starred * in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/ar/</th>
<th>/e/</th>
<th>/il/</th>
<th>/al/</th>
<th>/a/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plain</td>
<td>said</td>
<td>pretty</td>
<td>because</td>
<td>a address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plaid</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>women</td>
<td>busy</td>
<td>again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salmon</td>
<td>friend</td>
<td>busy</td>
<td>honour</td>
<td>shoulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leopard</td>
<td>sleeve</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The list of exception words is taken from Diane McGuinness, Early Reading Instruction, MIT 2004, p58.

Useful ‘Whole Words’

These words are printed in italics on the charts or bold on the worksheets; the only words that may be taught as ‘whole words’ are shown below:

the one once two who are eye of here

Even they are taught within their sound category, as all words can be decoded:

/l/ gne, once /l/ twg, who /l-ai/ earl, here
/l/ two /l/ who /l/ of
CHAPTER 1

‘High Frequency’ words within SRS

Exception words raises the question of the 300+ ‘high frequency’ words often taught in random order as ‘sight’ words over a three – four year period in school. ‘High frequency’ words are not the same as exception words. ‘High frequency’ words are included within the SRS programme but under the corresponding sound category and can be easily taught during the first years of learning to read - or at ‘Catch-up’ in a few months. These words do not cause any problems if the logic of the Sound Reading System approach is maintained.

‘Sight words’ imposed as such, undo the ‘synthetic phonic’ approach detailed below: sound + sound + sound = word. They also create memory stress for some children and the needless confusion of muddling the shape of one word with another. Teachers will recognise this when a child confuses words such as: ‘off’ ‘from’ ‘for’ or ‘this’ ‘that’ ‘there’ or ‘where’ ‘what’ ‘when’ etc.

Here are a few examples of ‘high frequency’ or ‘sight words’ and how they are included in a sound category within the SRS programme.

said again = sound /e/
we she he see been been tree three these = sound /ee/
play day way may came made name take they = sound /a-e/

The Sound Reading System teaches the learner to recognise the multiple spellings for a sound through interactive, multi-sensory activities that support the memory:

“The brain cannot cope with randomness... and very little active memorisation is necessary when learning is based on exposure to predictable patterns.”


Spelling Rules

English spelling conforms to spelling patterns and tendencies rather than rules. Spelling ‘rules’ only stand up for part of the time, therefore they are not rules. “Children cannot remember rules, much less apply them” (Diane McGuinness, p.44 Early Reading Instruction, MIT Press 2004). If children are taught to notice these patterns and tendencies from the outset, and are able to compare them, they will also notice the ‘odd ones out’. It is worth remembering that there are only 44 sounds that have around 176 common spellings: this accounts for the code that needs to be taught within a logical and systematic framework. Many children have struggled to memorise the three hundred or so random ‘high frequency’ words, also known as ‘sight’ words. This struggle has stood in their way and they have not learnt to read easily.

Synthetic Phonics

SRS falls into the ‘synthetic phonics’ category of teaching reading. ‘Synthetic phonics’ simply means that we must account for each sound in a word and to synthesise, blend or push together the sounds to make a whole word. The learner needs to be taught the spellings that represent the sounds. It is diametrically opposite to asking children to recognise ‘whole’ words and memorise them. Instead children learn the code and apply it, using the skills of segmenting and blending. This is also known as the ‘simple view’ of reading, the ability to decode.

Diane McGuinness used the term ‘linguistic phonics’ to emphasise the complete nature of the spelling code. A code that represents the spoken sounds of English.

Teaching and Learning

We know there are 44 spoken sounds that are represented by 176 common spellings so we need to acknowledge that there is a lack of transparency to the English Alphabet Code that could be daunting to teach if the teaching is not carefully and logically organised.

Diane McGuinness has understood how important it is to analyse the code for effective teaching and the steps that the Sound Reading System proposes rest on her analysis and research.

Decoding the Code

Stephen Pinker wrote the words below in the foreword of Diane’s seminal work Why Children Can’t Read. This is an important statement:

“Children are wired for sound, but print is an optional accessory that must be painstakingly bolted on. This basic fact about human nature should be the starting point for any discussion of how to teach our children to read and write.

We need to understand how the contraption called writing works, and how the mind of a child works, and how to get the two to mesh.”

Stephen Pinker, Johnstone Family Professor, Department of Psychology, Harvard University

This is where we must begin as teachers. We need to understand:

• how the contraption called writing works,
• how the mind of a child works,
• and how to get the two to mesh.

Before moving on, familiarise yourself with the charts. The following exercise helps to highlight the complexity of the code as well as what needs to be taught.