

Phonological awareness is the ability to reflect upon and consciously manipulate the sound structures of language at each level—word, syllable, and phoneme.

This means phonological awareness is an umbrella term for a broad set of skills that vary in difficulty by:

- Size of the unit manipulated. For example, syllable or phoneme.
- Judgement that is needed. For example, ‘Do these two words rhyme?’ or ‘What else rhymes with...?’).

Phonemic awareness is one aspect of phonological awareness and refers to the skill of manipulating the smallest unit—phonemes. For example, isolating the initial sound ‘d’ in ‘dig’.

Evidence suggests weaker readers, as well as children with dyslexia, perform less well on phonemic awareness tasks¹. Training phoneme awareness can improve word reading².

Teachers could use the tasks in Figure 1 to assess children’s phonemic awareness and understand their next steps.

Fig 1.

Task	Pupils can...	Example
Phoneme isolation	Recognise alliteration	Correctly identifies that ‘cat’ and ‘cot’ start with the same phoneme when also given the word ‘dig’.
	Recognise when words have the same final phoneme	Correctly identifies that ‘top’ and ‘cap’ end with the same phoneme when also given the word ‘pig’.
	Isolate the first phoneme in words	Gives the picture of a ‘sun’ in answer to the question, ‘Which picture begins with ‘s’?’.
Blending	Orally blend isolated phonemes together to hear words	Says ‘dad’ when given ‘d-a-d’. Phonemes that make a long sound may be easier to blend at first, e.g. ‘mmmmooooonnn’, than those with a short sound e.g. ‘bat’.
	Orally blend longer words with consonant clusters	Says ‘clip’, ‘sift’, ‘splat’, ‘sprint’, when presented with their isolated phonemes. Words with consonant clusters at the beginning may be initially easier to blend than those with clusters at the end.
Segmentation	Orally segment words into their component phonemes	When given ‘sit’ can hear and isolate each of the word’s phonemes ‘s-i-t’.
	Orally segment longer words with consonant clusters	When given ‘slop’ can hear and isolate each of the word’s phonemes ‘s-l-o-p’. Words with consonant clusters at the beginning may be initially easier to segment than those at the end.
Phoneme addition	Manipulate words by adding phonemes in different locations	Adding ‘c’ to the word ‘am’ to create ‘cam’, or adding ‘t’ to the word ‘bel’ to create ‘belt’.
Phoneme deletion	Manipulate phonemes by deleting them from the beginning or end of words	Removing ‘c’ from ‘cup’ to get ‘up’.
	Manipulate phonemes by deleting phonemes within consonant clusters	Removing ‘n’ from ‘long’ to get ‘log’.
Phoneme substitution	Substitute initial phoneme with another—this would make a rhyming string	Deleting ‘s’ from ‘sit’ and adding ‘p’ instead to get ‘pit’.
	Substitute a phoneme within a word	Deleting the short ‘a’ in ‘fad’ with the long ‘a-e’ to get ‘fade’.

1. Hulme, C. and Snowling, M. J. (2016) ‘Reading Disorders and Dyslexia’, Current Opinion in Paediatrics, 28, pp. 731–735.

2. Melby-Lervåg, M., Lyster, S. A. H. and Hulme, C. (2012) ‘Phonological Skills and Their Role in Learning to Read: A Meta-Analytic Review’, Psychological Bulletin, 138 (2), p. 322.