# Which Sound Does 'Ea' Make? Teaching Reception's Trickiest Vowel Digraph

A gentle guide to helping your child in Reception understand the different sounds the letters 'ea' can make when they appear together in words.

## What is 'ea'?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), children learn phonics. Phonics is a way of teaching children to read and write by matching sounds to letters. Sometimes, two letters join together to make one single sound; this is called a digraph. The 'ea' digraph is a bit special because it can make different sounds. Most often, it makes a long /ee/ sound, like in 'sea' or 'leaf'. However, it can also sound like the /e/ in 'bread' or the /ai/ in 'break'. It is very common for children to find this a little confusing at first, as they expect the letters to always sound the same.

## What happens in the classroom?

Teachers usually introduce the most common sound first—the long /ee/ sound—to build your child's confidence. As they progress, they will encounter words where 'ea' sounds different. Instead of guessing, children are taught to look at the word and use context clues (the other words in the sentence or a picture) to figure out which sound fits best. Because every school follows its own specific phonics programme, the order in which these sounds are taught may vary. If you are unsure which sound your child is currently learning, your child's teacher will be happy to let you know.

## What this means for your child

When your child comes across a word like 'bread' but tries to read it as 'breed', it is a natural part of learning. This is often a 'tipping point' where children realise that English spelling isn't always predictable. It is important to keep this moment positive. Rather than seeing it as a mistake, you can treat it as a discovery. By staying calm and reassuring, you help your child feel confident enough to keep trying, ensuring they move into Year 1 with a positive attitude toward reading.

## Simple ways to help at home

You don't need to do any formal drilling or lessons. Instead, try short, playful activities. When you spot an 'ea' word in a storybook, you could say, 'Look, here is 'ea' again! I wonder which sound it is making in this word?' You can create a simple 'word bank' on a piece of paper, grouping words by their sound (e.g., a 'leaf' group and a 'bread' group). If your child gets stuck, a quick script to use is: 'That's a tricky one! Let's look at the picture—does that word make sense if we say it that way?'

## Common questions

Parents often ask if they should correct every mistake immediately. It is usually best to let the child try first and then gently guide them using the context of the story. You might also wonder if your child should be able to spell these words yet; remember that reading a word is often easier than spelling it. For children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional

language, these patterns can take a little longer to click, and that is perfectly okay. Always feel free to ask the headteacher or class teacher for a quick update on your child's progress.

## Sources


- Department for Education, 'The National Curriculum in England: Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage'
- GOV.UK, 'Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework'