Magic E Explained: How a Silent Letter Changes a Vowel Sound in Year 1 Phonics

A simple guide to 'Magic E' (split digraphs), explaining how a silent letter at the end of a word changes the sound of the vowel, helping your child build confidence in Year 1 phonics.

What is 'Magic E'?

If your child is in Year 1, they might come home talking about 'Magic E'. In school, this is a friendly way of describing 'split digraphs'. A digraph is a pair of letters that make one sound together. Usually, these letters sit side-by-side, but in a split digraph, the letters are separated by another consonant. The 'e' at the end is silent, but it changes how we say the vowel before it. This is a key part of phonics—the method children use to link sounds to letters—and is taught as part of the national guidance for early reading.

How does it work?

The 'Magic E' changes a short vowel sound into a long vowel sound. For example, in the word 'cap', the 'a' makes a short sound. When we add an 'e' to the end to make 'cake', the 'e' stays silent, but it tells the 'a' to say its name (the long sound). You can see this in other pairs too: 'pin' becomes 'pine', 'hop' becomes 'hope', and 'cub' becomes 'cube'. It is a simple rule that unlocks many new words for children as they move through their phonics lessons.

What this means for your child

Learning split digraphs is an exciting step, but it can be a bit tricky because the letters aren't touching. Your child will be practicing these sounds to prepare for the Phonics Screening Check, a short assessment in Year 1 that checks if children can read words by sounding them out. Some children find it a challenge to remember to look at the end of the word before they start reading the vowel. This is completely normal, and with a bit of playful practice, it becomes second nature.

Easy ways to help at home

You don't need any special equipment to help your child. Try playing 'Word Change' with a few scraps of paper. Write 'can' and ask your child what happens if you add a 'magic e' to the end to make 'cane'. You can also go on a 'sound hunt' in a favourite storybook, looking for words that end in 'e' and chatting about how the vowel sounds. Keep it short and light; a few minutes of play is much more effective than long study sessions. If you are unsure which words they are learning, your child's teacher can let you know.

Common questions

Parents often ask if they should 'drill' these words with their children. The answer is no; playful exploration is best. You might also wonder why your child is learning this now—it is part of the Phase 5 phonics stage, where children move from simple sounds to more complex patterns. If your child has SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or is learning English as an additional language, they may take a different path or need more time with these sounds. Every child progresses at their own pace, and your school is there to support them.

Sources

- Department for Education: Letters and Sounds (Phase 5)