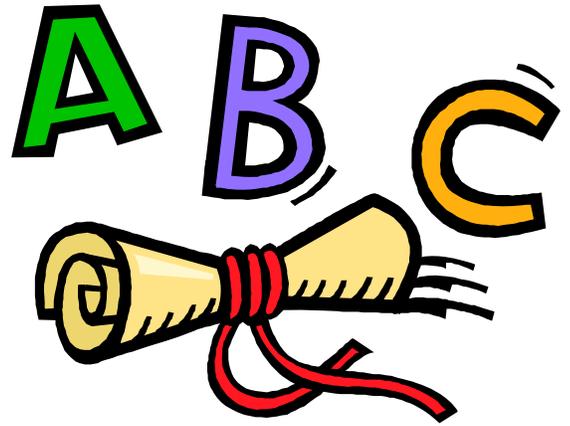


GOAL: Learn the Alphabet, Letters & Sounds



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Napa City-County Library

Introduction

When you think about it, there's nothing in life that doesn't first start small. Human beings start that way as babies. Flowers start out as seeds. Skyscrapers begin as concrete blocks. Words are the same way. The long words start with smaller bits and pieces of sounds and letters. And great readers become great because they learn to read little by little, step by step.

Learning the alphabet and its letters and sounds is the first step to being able to read well. When we master the alphabet, we are on our way to reading words, and then sentences, and then paragraphs and then complete books.

Like everything else in life, we start with the small steps first. When it comes to reading, those steps involve mastering the alphabet.

Getting Started

Many people first learned the alphabet through the “alphabet song”—and although it may seem “childish” to introduce the alphabet this way, there is a good reason for doing so. Offering a device to memorize the alphabet and get a sense of it as a whole is really important. However, for those who may not be comfortable with learning the alphabet song, there are other ways to get a feel for the entire alphabet.

Sandpaper letters offer a great way to “submerge” the kinesthetic sense. Sandpaper letters of the alphabet are a great resource that should be available through your literacy program. Close your eyes and feel the sandpaper letter and repeat the name of the letter and then the sound. Then trace repeatedly on the sandpaper and then lift the finger off to form the letter in the air.

Alphabet magnets also provide a great hands-on way to introduce the alphabet and group and organize the letters in a number of ways. These work well for practicing sequencing of the alphabet.

For those who may have access to more space, using an alphabet mat can be effective with adults, especially those who are kinesthetic learners. “Walking or dancing through the alphabet” and saying the letters and their sounds as you step on the targeted letter is a fun way to immerse yourself in the alphabet.

As with all learning, a multisensory approach is best, so introduce the alphabet in a variety of ways that engage the senses. Don’t be shy. Try several things and then determine which are most effective. This could include using clay or finger paints or singing or drawing. I once taught the alphabet with chocolate pudding, so my learner could lick her finger after “pudding painting” the letters on a plate. Yum!

Key Vocabulary

Vowels and Consonants. Once you have a grasp of the alphabet as a whole, then you can begin to discuss the ways that the alphabet is organized. A critical grouping is consonants and vowels.

Vowels and consonants are different in a number of ways, but the most critical has to do with air flow.

Here are the vowels in the order they appear in the alphabet:

a e i o u

Vowels have no obstruction to the air flow, so their sounds can be made forever. Say the vowel sounds and feel what is going on physically in your mouths. There is no blockage. Vowel sounds can be made infinitely, and English relies heavily on them. Every English word has a vowel. Vowels are needed to make syllables.

Next learn the consonants. Here they are in the order they appear in the alphabet:

b c d f g h j k l m n p q r s t v
w x y z

Feel how these sounds are made in the mouth. How they are different from vowels? Consonants have some kind of partial or full obstruction to the air flow. Experiment with feeling how the different consonants are made. How is the tongue positioned? What is the difference between an “f” and a “v”? A “b” and “p”? Feel how sounds are made. What are the lips doing when make a “b” or a “f”?

You can set the foundation for good reading by learning the alphabet letters and sounds in three ways (a) how they sound (b) how they look (c) how they feel in the mouth.

Books & Materials

The next critical step in learning the alphabet is to be able to write the letters. Three books commonly used in adult literacy programs are each great resources when teaching the alphabet:

Focus on Phonics, 1 (New Readers Press)
Reading for Today, Introductory Book (Steck-Vaughn)
Voyager, Foundation Book (New Readers Press)

For some great online resources, take a look at:

<http://www.shambles.net/pages/learning/primary/Alphab/> -- Here you'll find a collection of websites that offer free alphabet worksheets, free activities that strengthen alphabet skills and much more!

Or try this well-reviewed software:

Lexia from Lexia Learning Systems (800) 435-3942 www.lexialearning.com/Visual; features activities designed to appeal and motivate adults and it begins its instructional sequence with the alphabet. It is multi-sensory with many pictures, spoken instructions, repetition and reinforcement. Talk to your Literacy Services Staff to see if this is available in your library/literacy computer lab or if this is something they would consider purchasing.

Reading Practice

There is a world of alphabet books out there that are targeted not only for children but adults as well. They go from the very obscure to the more down-to-earth. Some libraries put a special sticker on the spines of alphabet books so you can find them easily. Talk to your children's librarian to see if your library does this. Here are some alphabet books that can be easily found in many children's sections of our libraries:

From Anne to Zach by Mary Jane Martin Illustrated by Michael Grejniec, Boyds Mill Press, 1995. This book is a journey through the *A to Z* of people's names.

Achoo! Bang! Crash! The Noisy Alphabet by Ross McDonald, Roaring Book Press, 2003. This alphabet book is a playful and smart look at sounds from "achoo" to "zoom."

Tomorrow's Alphabet by George Shannon, Illustrated by Donald Crew, Greenwillow Books, 1996. This is an alphabetic view of life's before and afters—eg: apple seeds to apple fruit.

The Z was Zapped by Chris Van Allsburg, Houghton-Mifflin, 1987. This book is a surrealist's photographic exploration of the alphabet. This is a clever and creative look at the ABCs.

Writing Practice

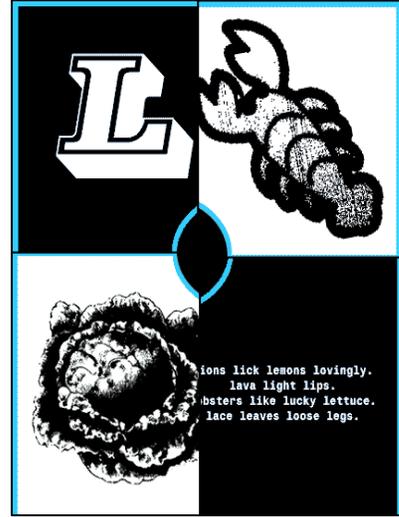
Create Your Own Alphabet Book. As you work through the alphabet, brainstorm words that begin with each sound. Then, create a personalized alphabet book with words that are meaningful to you. Bring the book to life with family photos or found objects so that the alphabet book is a true expression of your life.

You can find some more innovative approaches to alphabet books online:

<http://www.goldtop.org/Alphabet/b.html> -- This artistic website will give you some ideas on building your own alphabet book. ➤

Here are some more examples of alphabet books for adults that are sure to capture your imagination. Again, look for these books on your library shelves and/or recommend that your library purchase them:

- ABC3D by Marion Bataille, Roaring Brook Press, 2008.
Video:
http://us.macmillan.com/BookCustomPage.aspx?isbn=9781596434257&m_type=2&m_contentid=339238#video
- The Alphabet from A to Y With Bonus Letter Z! by Steve Martin and Roz Chast, Random House, 2007.
- Creatures: An Alphabet for Adults & Worldly Children by Frank Newfield, Greenwood Books, 1998.
- And this is just video, not a book: Saving the Alphabet by Alan Bigelow, <http://www.savingthealphabet.com/>



Games & Activities

Although some of the following games may seem childish, they can be adapted for adults in a number of ways and also taught in the spirit of a light heart. You're never too old to have fun while learning.

Alphabet on the Move. As mentioned earlier, alphabet rugs and alphabet floor titles can be used to play hopscotch and other fun recognition games that anchor the letters *kinesthetically*. If you don't have these items handy, make your own letter tiles: simply write each letter as big as you can onto separate pieces of paper. Lay them out on the ground and then toss a hopscotch marker (bean-bag, small rock, eraser, etc.) to the targeted letter and say not only the name of the letter but the sound. More advanced learners can also say a word that begins with the letter.

Go Fish. There are many ways to play this. One version is to make a large deck composed of a variety of pictures from magazines and personal albums. Make at least four cards on 4 by 6 index cards for each letter; e.g.: a card with a picture of a cat, one with a candy bar, another with a candle and one of a car. Once all the cards are made, deal seven cards to each person, with the goal of getting four of a kind. Just as in fish, a pile is left face down after dealing the cards. Take turns asking your opponent for the card you need, if s/he has it, keep asking for more until you have to “go fish” and take a card from the pile. Then it’s your opponent’s turn to ask you for card. The person who finishes with all their cards in sets of four wins.

War. Each person is dealt seven cards with pictures (like “Go Fish” above). The first person to get rid of all their cards wins. Once each person is dealt a hand, the rest of the cards are put face down, for the exception of one. Each player tries to find pictures that begin with the same sound as the one face up. A player who does not have a card that has the same sound, must draw until a card is found. The player who gets rid of all the cards first, wins.

Bingo. Make several bingo cards with a mix of upper and lowercase letters. Call out words to see if the learner can identify the initial sound and then find it on the bingo card, placing a token on each square that is a match. It’s best to play with two or more. The first person with tokens on 5-in-a-row or on every square wins. Use “free bingo card maker” software on-line at http://www.teach-nology.com/web_tools/materials/bingo/5/.

Alphabet Art Puzzle. Any alphabet puzzle you can find will be a helpful tool. Today’s alphabet puzzles are attractive and easy puzzles for beginners and offer both visual and kinesthetic reinforcement of the upper case alphabet letters.



Note: You can purchase alphabet flashcards, “Leap Frog Bingo,” and alphabet art puzzles from Educational Learning Games at <http://www.educationalllearninggames.com>. Or check with your Literacy Services Staff to see if they can purchase these helpful items, or something like them, for literacy program participants.

Independent Practice/Homework Ideas

- Check out alphabet books from the library and share them with your children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, etc.
- Using post-it notes, label items around the house with their initial sound, for instance: “L” for light.

Milestones

- **Initial Effort** – You know some of the letters of the alphabet and some of the sounds they make.
- **Making Progress** – You recognize all of the letters and are able to put them into sequence A – Z. You can write some of the letters. You are learning the sounds of more letters.
- **Accomplished** – You are able to recognize and identify the letters by their names and say the sounds they make. You know the difference between consonants and vowels and are able to write the letters in upper and lower case.



Once you have achieved some degree of mastery, you can begin to learn how words are built of sounds and syllables and then start modeling the process of combining sounds and letters to make new words. As with many things in life, it is critical to learn the basics through repetitive practice. It's perfectly normal to have to repeat and practice. Everything in life starts small. Learning the alphabet is one of the most important things we learn. You have embarked on a wonderful journey, starting one sound, one letter, one step at a time.

Contributor's Biography

Lisa Powers. Lisa began her career in adult education thirty years ago when she herself was a student at a community college, seeking a second chance. Having barely graduated high school, she became intrigued by learning differences and how we each can best leverage our talents and gifts. Over three decades, Lisa has worked in reading clinics, community colleges and library literacy programs. She has an MA in English, a BA in linguistics and is the author of three published books: And Sometimes We Forget, Eating Desire, and A Song Between Lives. Lisa enjoys being a mother to her sassy and sweet 15-year old daughter and loves to dance, cook, write and spend time with her sweetheart, John.