

Blends

Blends are sounds; they are two or three consecutive sounds that are often difficult to segment into individual sounds. They can occur at the start of words (*stop, spill, drop, splash, string, play*), at the end of words (*chest, golf, silk, hint*) and in the middle of words (*explore, constant*).

Students with phonemic awareness difficulties frequently omit one of the letters that represent the sound they have difficulty hearing – often the second sound in the blend (drop – dop, black – back, splash – slash, string – sring). The problem is not that they cannot spell blends, it is that they cannot hear both or all sounds in the blends. These students need phonemic awareness training but the blend sounds can be used to provide this. *Switch on to Spelling* (p.279) and *Spelling Under Scrutiny* (p.109) both have Blends Homework Programmes to support students whose blend spelling errors show that they have segmenting difficulties.

Digraphs

The word grapheme is used to describe the spelling patterns that represent the sounds of English. Any letter or group of letters that represent a sound of English is called a grapheme. Digraphs are graphemes. When two letters represent one sound, this spelling pattern, or grapheme is called a digraph. Di means two and graph means letters – two letters, one sound.

English orthography is made up of single letters representing single sounds (**p** for /p/ - *pot*, **t** for /t/ - *top*, **a** for /a/ - *and* etc.), two letters representing single sounds – digraphs (**pp** for /p/ - *happy*, **tt** for /t/ - *pretty*, **ai** for the long /a/ - *train*, **ow** for /ow/ - *cow* etc.), three letters representing single sounds – tri graphs (**igh** for the long /i/ - *light*, **air** for /air/ - *hair* etc), and four letters representing single sounds – quad graphs (**ough** for /or – *thought*, **eigh** for the long /a/ - *eight* etc.). Generally speaking we use the word digraph to describe the two letter spelling patterns and letter strings or clusters to describe the three and four letter patterns.

Teaching Blends and Digraphs

Blends and digraphs should be taught differently. Once students can segment sounds in words (including separating blend sounds) and they know how to represent each sound with an appropriate letter or digraph, they do not need extra instruction with spelling blends. However, because these sounds are the most difficult to segment, words containing blends can be used to practise segmenting and writing the sounds of English. Knowledge of digraphs will develop as students are exposed to different ways of writing the sounds of English. They will learn that the same sound can be written with a single letter (the long /a/ is an **a** in *apron*), with digraph patterns (an **ai** in *train*, an **ea** in *great*, an **ay** in *play*) and with longer spelling patterns (an **eigh** in *eight*). It is best not to teach blends and digraphs together, since the **st** and **sp** in *stop* and *spot* have a different sound structure from the **sh** in *ship*.