

The Vowel Generator

The Vowel Generator is a system for forming all the possible two-letter vowels in our language. When two letters combine to form one sound, they are called digraphs.

The Vowel Generator consists of the combination of the five vowels with other letters to form all the vowel digraphs in English. Amazingly enough, there are only three other letters that vowels combine with to make the entire array of digraphs.

NB: Vowels can also combine with the letter 'h', such as in the interjection words 'ah', 'eh', 'oh' and 'uh', but I have not included them as I don't consider them true digraphs. They are not generally used independently in the spelling of other English words.

LESSON PLAN

Materials

- A printout of a blank Vowel Generator grid
- Students will need to have their Consonant Start and End Cards out on the desk.

STEP 1

Distribute a blank Vowel Generator. Leave the first square blank and fill the first row and column with the five single vowels. Figure out the additional three letters ('r', 'w', 'y') and place them in the last squares of row 1.

STEP 2

Combine the columns with the rows to generate possible and non-possible vowel digraphs. Write examples for the possible digraphs and strike out the squares for the non-possible digraphs.

NOTES ON UNCOMMON COMBINATIONS

aa – Dutch-derived words like 'aardvark' and 'aardwolf' are really the only examples of this combination

ae – Greek-derived words can have this combination, such as 'encyclopaedia', but it's not a common English digraph. Your judgement is

required here as to whether to include this in the grid. I tend not to include it during therapeutic lessons, but by all means teach it to mainstream learners.

ao – some students will suggest ‘aorta’ as an ‘ao’ example, and true enough, the ‘a’ and ‘o’ are adjacent in this word and similar words, but we are looking at digraphs: two letters, one sound. Taken syllable by syllable, ‘aorta’ looks like this: a or ta. The ‘a’ and the ‘o’ do not combine to form one sound. Instead, they constitute separate syllables. The same can be said for ‘eo’, ‘io’ and ‘ia’ words (‘geography’, ‘diode’, ‘mania’).

eo – in ‘leopard’ and ‘people’, we have a non-functional, silent ‘o’, but this is an uncommon combination in English. Far better to cross this square and learn the words with the following mnemonic:
‘When people see a leopard, they say “o!”’

uy – ‘Guy’ and ‘buy’ are common examples of this digraph. Whether you want to call this uncommon and learn the words as a Word Family or not is up to you.

PATTERNS

THE ‘O’ ROW – This is the only fully-filled row. The letter ‘o’ appears to be super-friendly, but on further investigation (e.g. looking down the ‘o’ column) you will find that it combines with other letters, but only if it goes first.

THE ‘E’ COLUMN

If you are including ‘ae’ then you can have your students observe the fact that this is one of two completely filled columns. This raises questions and answers about the letter ‘e’ and its commonality and flexibility. The ‘e’ row is also very full.

THE ‘R’ COLUMN

This is also a full column. In many accents of English, ‘r’ combines with each vowel to form a new sound. Rhotic accents (Scottish, Irish, Cornish, American and Canadian) pronounce vowel + ‘r’ as separate phonemes. But even in these accents, the vowel sound is changed by the addition of ‘r’. Compare the vowel in ‘cat’ to that in ‘car’, ‘sit’ to ‘sir’, ‘but’ to ‘burr’.

THE LETTER Y

In the debate about ‘y’ being a vowel v. consonant, there is more evidence of the status of ‘y’ being dependent on environment. We don’t add ‘y’ to the bottom row of the grid. If we did, we would generate nonsense, such as ‘ya’, ‘ye’, ‘yi’ combinations.

EXAMPLE LESSON

Distribute a blank Vowel Generator.

Leave the first square blank and write all the vowels across the first row. Then ask them to write all the vowels again down the first column. Their grid should look like this:

	a	e	i	o	u			
a								
e								
i								
o								
u								

"We are going to figure out all the possible two-letter combinations of vowels. We will do that by filling in this grid. This is called the Vowel Generator, because it generates all the two letter vowels in English.


Letters which combine to form one sound are called digraphs. 'Di' means 'two' and 'graph' means 'written or drawn'.

To generate all the digraphs, though, we need three more letters. There are three other letters that go with the vowels 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o' and 'u' to spell vowel sounds. Does anyone know any of them?"

Once your students have answered, if there are any left that you need to discover, fill in the blanks. The letters are 'r', 'w' and 'y'.

"Let's generate the first two-letter vowel. Starting with the first letter in the first column, the letter 'a', let's combine it with the first letter in the top row. This would give us the vowel combination 'aa'. Is that a common vowel digraph in English?" (NO)

"In that case we won't include it in our store of digraphs. Put a line through the 'aa' square."

	a	e	i	o	u	r	w	y
a								
e								
i								
o								
u								

"Our next combination is what?" (AE)
 "Common or not common?" (NOT COMMON)
 "Next combination?" (AI)
 "Common or not?" (COMMON)
 "What sound?" (/AY/, AS IN 'PLAY')
 "Write 'ai' in the next square of the grid, leaving some space for your example words.
 Can you think of any words that have this combination? Let's use the Consonant Cards and see what we can come up with.

Write your examples in your notebooks in a Word Family with feature 'ai'.

The words we can generate using our consonant cards are mainly one syllable words. Let's take a few and add some prefixes and suffixes.

Let's do an example word that doesn't come up with the consonant cards. How about 'contain'?"

	a	e	i	o	u	r	w	y
a	/	/	ai contain					
e								
i								
o								
u								

We could add some suffixes to that word. What suffixes?
 (-ER, -ED, -ING, -S, -MENT)
 Time for the next digraph:
 a-o, yes or no? (NO)
 Put a line through the 'ao' square.
 Continue to fill the grid.

VOWEL GENERATOR SINGLE SYLLABLE EXAMPLE WORDS

ai- bail, bait, fail
au- caul, daub, fault
ar- card, carp, cart
aw- brawl, crawl, drawl
ay- day, bay, say
ea- beam, seat, teal
ee- feed, deep, heel
ei- skein, feint, heir
eu- feud, sleuth
er- herd, berth, serf
ew- blew, crew, drew
ey- they, key, prey
ie- died, cried, dried
ir- bird, dirt, shirt
oa- boat, boast, toast
oe- toed, floes, foes
oi- boil, soil, toil
oo- soot, hoot, boot
ou- hound, south, mouth
or- born, cord, forth
ow- howl, down, flown
oy- boy, joy, toy
ue- blue, true, glue
ui- fruit, suit, build
ur- church, turn, churn