

The Wicked Sisters and Other Wacky Rs

THEORY

Your students have learned all the sounds that single vowels can make, but there are other sounds and spellings that they should know about. In this lesson, we are going to look at what happens to a vowel when it comes before the letter <r>.

The reason I have chosen to cover these particular combinations of letters at this point is that firstly, they follow a distinct pattern, which helps to reinforce the idea that English spelling can be organised, analysed and classified according to certain patterns.

When a vowel comes before the letter <r>, its sound changes. This is known as an R-controlled vowel, both in accents that feature the pronunciation of <r> after vowels and those that don't. It's as if the letter *r* makes the vowels go a little "wacky". This is why you will be referring to the unit consisting of a vowel plus the letter <r> as a "Wacky R".

It is a good idea to become familiar with the sound of each of these digraphs. Following is a list of vowels and example words to help you become familiar with the sounds that you will be asking your students to look out for:

ar car
er her
ir stir
or for
ur turn

The units *er*, *ir* and *ur* are called the Wicked Sisters, as they are so wicked, that you can't help exclaiming in disgust when you see them (i.e. "Ugh!", which sounds like /er/ir/ur/). This joke highlights the fact that these three units sound exactly the same.

NB: This joke works better in non-rhotic accents of English, such as most English and Australian accents. Scottish, Cornish and American speakers will have to use their imaginations a little more!

THE LESSON

Distribute the Wacky R worksheets.

Ask your students to write the vowels of the alphabet in the first column.

Revise the sounds each vowel can represent.

Next, ask your students to write the letter *r* after each vowel.

AR

Script:

“When the letter <r> comes after a vowel, it makes the vowel go a bit wacky. Do you know what the letter <a> represents when the letter <r> comes after it?” (/AR/)

“This is the next rule. Write it down.”

RULE: When a vowel comes before r, it goes wacky.

“The example word we are going to use is the word *smart*.

“Write it next to the <ar>.”

Now write the following words: *car, part, charm, start, artist*.”

Dictate these words one at a time and let your students spell them for themselves. They have all the information necessary to work out the sounds in these words, with the possible exception of *artist*. When dictating this word, say:

“The word *artist* has a suffix on it which means ‘person who does’. This ending is spelled <I-S-T>.”

“There are three wacky Rs that sound the same. Which ones are they?”
(ER, IR, UR)

“These are called the 3 Wicked Sisters, a bit like the ones in Cinderella, because when you see them, you say, “Er! Ir! Ur!”

Draw the three wicked sisters on the board and tell the following story. Write the words underneath the pictures and underline the Wicked Sister sound in each word. For the last two words, the students can guess what the word is.

“The first Wicked Sister actually has a really horrible name. Her name is Frogmelda. It’s such a horrid name, that when people want to talk to her, they forget what her name is and just refer to Frogmelda as “Her!”

The second Wicked Sister looks a bit like a man. She has a goatee beard and a handlebar moustache. When she goes into a shop, instead of saying, “Can I help you, Madam?”, the assistants often say, “Can I help you...”

(SIR!)

“The third Wicked Sister is actually a werewolf. When the moon is full she grows long, sharp teeth, yellow eyes and her face becomes covered with...”

(FUR!)

The Three Wicked Sisters



her



sir



fur

OWNWORK:

Draw the three wicked sisters and write the different ways to spell their sound underneath them. Label your drawing as "The 3 Wicked Sisters".

More Wacky Rs

With the core Wacky Rs in place, this information can now be expanded to produce other spelling patterns. The addition of other letters to the original Wacky Rs can produce some interesting patterns. They are listed below, with Word Families to illustrate. The families are not intended as an exhaustive list of all possible words bearing these letter clusters.

Compilation of such lists I will leave to online lexicographers and hopefully to your students.

LESSON PLAN

STEP 1

Distribute the More Wacky Rs worksheet. Write ar in the first square and check the sound (/ar/ as in 'car').

STEP 2

Insert the letter 'e' before the 'ar' and, noting that it spells the word 'ear', figure out what sounds it can also make when inside words by using the Consonant Start and End Cards. Using the cards will derive three distinct Word Families:

EAR

BEAR

LEARN

STEP 3

Sort the words generated

1. Add the letter 'e' to 'ar' and pronounce the new sounds.
2. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to make example words like BEAR, DEAR and HEARD.

		new sound	examples
e+	ar=		
e+	ar=		
e+	ar=		

3. Start a new Word Family for uncommon -ear- sounds.

uncommon	
-ear-	

4. Add the letter 'w' to 'or' and pronounce the new sound.

5. Use your Consonant End Card to make example words like WORD.

		new sound	examples
w+	or=		

6. Start a new Word Family for uncommon -wor- sounds.

uncommon -wor-	
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7. Add the letter 'w' to 'ar' and pronounce the new sound.

8. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to make example words like WAR.

		new sound	examples
w+	ar=		

EXAMPLE LESSON

We just looked at the Wacky Rs, but there are some more patterns that we can generate.

Let's go to the next worksheet.

"When we add 'e' to 'ar' we create three possible sounds. First, we have the word 'ear', so that's the first new sound. Let's put that word in the first 'new sound' box. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to figure out the other e-a-r sounds."

Brainstorm this. If the students are using the cards alphabetically, at some point they will generate 'bear' and 'learn'. Along with 'ear', these words can be used as the heads of the three Word Families.

There is also a space provided for the uncommon sounds such as in 'heart'.

When we add 'w' to 'or', the 'or' often makes a Wicked Sister sound, for instance, 'word'. Let's use the Consonant Start and End Cards to find more words like 'word'.

"When we add 'w' to 'ar', the 'ar' often makes an /or/ sound, for instance, 'war'. Let's use the Consonant Start and End Cards to find more words like 'war'."

SOME WORD FAMILIES

e + ar = BEAR, DEAR and LEARN Word Families:

BEAR

wear, pear, tear, swear

DEAR

nuclear, appear, arrears, beard, year, bleary, clear, dear, dreary, fear,
gear, hear, near, rear, sear, shear, smear, spear, tear, weary

HEARD

search, dearth, early, earn, earth, heard, hearse, pearl, earnest,
rehearse, research, search, yearn

With three possible exceptions:

heart, hearth, hearken

If students suggest 'heart', 'hearth' or possibly even 'hearken', let them know that they are exceptional words (victims, in fact, of 'The Great Vowel Shift'. Their spelling survived their change in pronunciation.

The EAR and BEAR families can also be expanded to generate homophones. For instance, 'hear/here, dear/deer, shear/sheer' or 'bear/bare, pear/pare/pair'.

w + or = WORD words and WORN words:

WORM: word, work, world, worse, worship, worst, worth,

WORE: worn, wort

w + ar = WAR words:

award, ward, dwarf, warn, warm, reward, toward, sward, swarm, swarthy, thwart, warrant, warble, wardrobe, warp, warren, wart

Words that denote direction, such as 'westward', 'inward', 'downward' and 'forward' all contain 'ward', but they have emphasis on the first syllable. Therefore, in these words, w + ar + d are pronounced with a weak vowel sound in the second syllable. This is also a good opportunity to compile a word family.

Worksheets

Wacky Rs Worksheet

1. Add the letter 'r' to each vowel and pronounce the new sound.
2. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to make example words and write them in the boxes below..

a	
e	
i	
o	
u	

3. Write the Wacky R Rule:

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4. Draw the Three Wicked Sisters below:

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More Wacky Rs Worksheet

1. Add the letter 'e' to 'ar' and pronounce the new sounds.
2. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to make example words like BEAR, DEAR and HEARD.

		new sound	examples
e+	ar=		
e+	ar=		
e+	ar=		

3. Start a new Word Family for uncommon -ear- sounds.

uncommon -ear-	
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4. Add the letter 'w' to 'or' and pronounce the new sound.
5. Use your Consonant End Card to make example words like WORD.

		new sound	examples
w+	or=		

6. Start a new Word Family for uncommon -wor- sounds.

uncommon -wor-	
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7. Add the letter 'w' to 'ar' and pronounce the new sound.

8. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to make example words like WAR.

		new sound	examples
w+	ar=		

Wacky Rs and Final Silent E Worksheet

1. Add the letter 'e' to each Wacky R and pronounce the new sound.
2. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to make example words and write them in the boxes below.
3. Use your Consonant Start and End Cards to find examples of homophones

wacky r	+e	new sound	examples	homophones
ar				
er				
ir				
or				
ur				