Word and code complexity continuum

The word and code complexity continuum diagram shows the gradual progression of skills that students need to develop so they can read and spell words with increasing complexity. By understanding this continuum and using a systematic synthetic phonics approach, teachers can strategically support students to develop strong decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling) skills by teaching at students' point of need.

Code complexity refers to the letter–sound correspondences that students must learn to progress along the continuum. Word complexity addresses the number of phonemes (sounds) represented in words, the number of syllables in words, and word-building concepts such as morphology.

Use this continuum to:
- understand what to teach
- know where your students' skills lie
- identify your students' next steps
- track your students' growth.

These steps are informed by the developmental continuum of phonic knowledge and word recognition outlined by ACARA's National Literacy Learning Progression and by the phonic and word knowledge curriculum from the Australian Curriculum, reading and viewing element.

Core skills for decoding and encoding along the continuum

A student's ability to read and spell at word level relies on their code knowledge and their phonemic awareness skills of blending and segmenting (Kilpatrick 2015; Scarborough 2001). To progress through the word and code complexity continuum and become skilled and automatic readers and spellers, students should be supported with explicit direction instruction and strategic guided practice of these skills in combination, using a phonics instructional model.

Visit the **Literacy Hub website** at www.literacyhub.edu.au to access more free, evidence-based literacy resources for teachers.

Knowing where to target instruction

To identify where students sit on the continuum, teachers should consider students':

- code knowledge
- phonemic awareness skills
- understanding of concepts such as digraphs and morphology.

If students can independently read and spell words automatically on a particular step, then teachers can provide explicit direct instruction for the word and code types on the next step of the continuum.

Use data from the Year 1 Phonics Check and other assessments to find students' point of need and to plan subsequent instruction.

Useful links and further reading

Australian Curriculum reading and viewing

Introduction to systematic synthetic phonics

Kilpatrick DA (2015) *Assessing, preventing and overcoming reading difficulties*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken.

Scarborough H (2001) 'Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: evidence, theory and practice', in Newman S and Dickinson D (eds) *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, Guilford Press, New York.
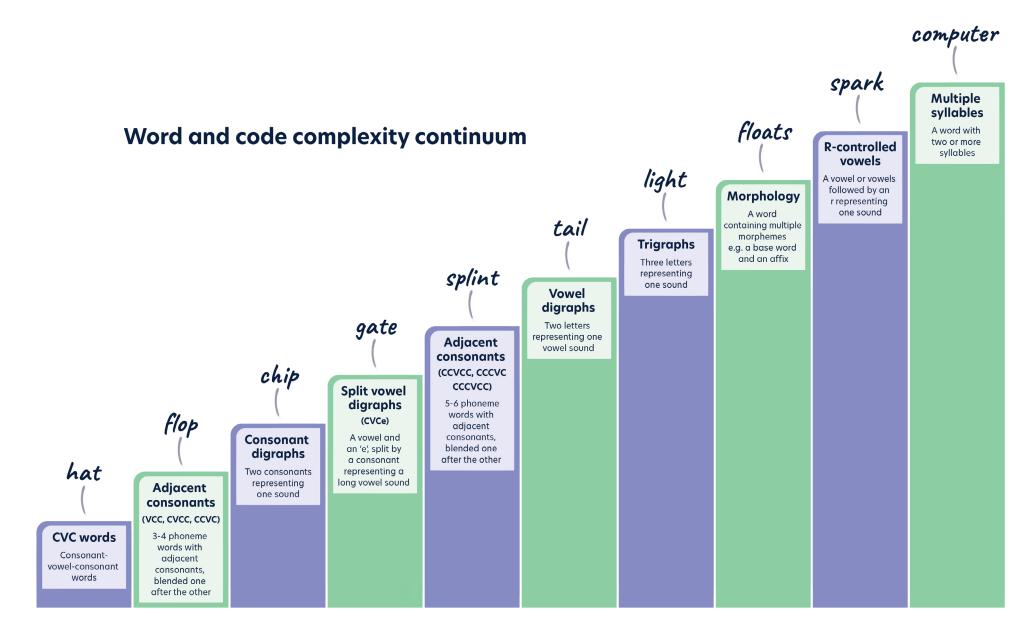
Year 1 Phonics Check on the Literacy Hub

Word and code complexity continuum

hat

CVC words

Consonant-vowel-consonant words

flop

Adjacent consonants

(VCC, CVCC, CCVC)

3-4 phoneme words with adjacent consonants, blended one after the other

chip

Consonant digraphs

Two consonants representing one sound

gate

Split vowel digraphs

(CVCe)

A vowel and an 'e', split by a consonant representing a long vowel sound

splint

Adjacent consonants

(CCVCC, CCCVC CCCVCC)

5-6 phoneme words with adjacent consonants, blended one after the other

tail

Vowel digraphs

Two letters representing one vowel sound

light

Trigraphs

Three letters representing one sound

floats

Morphology

A word containing multiple morphemes e.g. a base word and an affix

spark

R-controlled vowels

A vowel or vowels followed by an r representing one sound

computer

Multiple syllables

A word with two or more syllables