

Y and W Are Sometimes Vowels and Sometimes Consonants

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The letters y and w can function as both vowels and consonants. Many students and teachers know that the vowels are “a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y.” Indeed, if you are over 50, you may have learned that the vowels are “a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y and w.” Yet most people, even teachers, cannot explain why the letters y and w are only “sometimes” vowels. Those teachers who do understand spelling patterns for the letters y and w are better able to diagnose and remedy the problems students have reading words with these letters.

Why Y and W Are Sometimes Vowels and Sometimes Consonants

To understand why the letters y and w are “sometimes vowels,” consider that the terms “vowel” and “consonant” define both sounds and letters. For example, *short a (/ă/)* and *long a (/ā/)* are vowel sounds and the *letter a* is a vowel letter.

A letter is categorized as a vowel or consonant based on whether it spells a vowel or consonant sound. Therefore, y is a consonant letter in the word *yet* because it spells the consonant sound /y/. On the other hand, y is a vowel letter in the word *my* because it spells the vowel sound /ī/ (*long i*). Similarly, w is a consonant letter in the word *will* because it spells the consonant sound /w/. W is a vowel letter in the word *clown* because it is part of the vowel team *ow* that spells the vowel sound /ou/.

What New and Struggling Readers Need to Know About Y and W

It is important to make sure that the letters y and w do not confuse students. To eliminate confusion, the minimum we need to teach beginning and struggling readers about the letters y and w is:

- the letters y and w spell their consonant sounds (/y/ and /w/) only when they are immediately before a vowel letter in a syllable (*yell, yoke, yearn; will, wake, weap*).
- The letters y and w spell vowel sounds as part of vowel team spellings when they are immediately after another vowel letter (*tray, valley, guy; paw, new, brown*).
- The letter y by itself can spell three vowel sounds: long e as in *happy*, short i as in *gym*, and long i as in *try* or *cyclone*.

Most reading programs explicitly teach the consonant sound /y/ for the letter y and /w/ for the letter w. Most phonics programs also do a good job of teaching that the letter y can spell three vowel sounds.

What too many reading programs don't explicitly teach is that y and w have their consonant sounds only when those letters are immediately before a vowel. New readers might try to sound out *key* as /k/ /ĕ/ /y/ or *draw* as /d/ /r/ /ă/ /w/. Students are sometimes confused because they haven't been taught that the letters y and w are always part of the vowel team spelling when they are immediately after another vowel in a syllable.

More Complexities of Spellings with Y and W

While preparing our workshop on the most confusing elements of phonics, we were surprised to learn how many ways the letters y and w can be used to spell various sounds. It is much more complex than the few patterns given above.

You can identify whether the letters y and w are functioning as vowels or consonants two ways. One is by matching the grapheme (letters that spell a sound) with the phoneme it spells and determining whether the grapheme is spelling a vowel or consonant phoneme. For example, the letter y is a consonant letter in the word *yell* because it spells the consonant sound /y/. Y is a vowel letter in the word *my* because it spells the vowel sound /i/ (long i).

Spelling patterns also show whether the letters y and w are consonants or vowels. Although most teachers won't need to teach all the intricacies of spellings involving the letters y and w, understanding these spelling patterns may help teachers explain spellings to their students. We describe the basic spelling patterns for the letters y and w below.

Y and W Are Consonants

The spelling patterns in which y and w spell consonant sounds are simple and easily explained.

- **The letters y and w spell consonant sounds only when they are before a vowel letter in a syllable.** This is an easy spelling pattern. The letters y and w spell the consonant sounds /y/ and /w/, respectively, only when they occur before the letters a, e, i, o, or u in a syllable. (The letter w can spell the /w/ consonant sound before the letter y in, but this pattern occurs only in proper names, e.g. Wyatt, Wyoming.)

Examples are:

- yak, Yale, yes, yeek, year, yen, yipping, yonder, yolk, yuck, yule
 - wax, wait, west, weep, wish, wipe, won, wove, wurst, wuthering.
- **The letter w spells a consonant sound in the consonant digraph wh.** Most of the time wh spells the consonant sound /w/. Wh spells the sound /h/ in only a few words.
 - when, which, whale, why
 - who, whom, whose, whole.

Y and W Are Vowels

The spelling patterns for y and w spelling vowel sounds are more complex. We'll start our exploration of the various ways in which y and w can spell vowels with vowel teams (sometimes referred to as vowel digraphs).

- **The letters y and w are vowels when they immediately follow another vowel letter in a vowel team.** When the letters y or w immediately follow any vowel letter in a syllable, they are part of a vowel team spelling a vowel sound. Examples are:
 - pay, valley, toy, buy, loyal, boycott, lawyer, newspaper
 - law, few, tow, grown, shown, power

- **The letter y is a vowel in the rare vowel team -ye** and generally spells the long i /ī / vowel sound. Examples are:
 - bye, dye, lye, rye

Another way that y can spell a vowel sound is in the y-consonant-e pattern. This pattern is not found in very many English words.

- **The letter y is a vowel in the not-very-common y-consonant-e pattern** and generally spells the long i /ī / vowel sound. Examples are:
 - analyze, argyle, byte, electrolyte, style, hype, lyre, type, paralyze.

Most reading teachers know that the letter y is a vowel when there is no other vowel letter in the syllable, such as in the words cry, crazy, gym, system, deny, and satisfy.

- **The letter y spells a vowel sound when there are no other vowel letters in the syllable.** The letter y can spell three different vowel sounds when it is in a syllable that has no other vowel letters: long i (ī) as in *by*, short i (i) as in *gym*, and long e (ē) as in *happy*.

There are fairly stable rules for when the letter y will spell the long e, long i, or short i sounds. They are simpler in single syllable words than in multi-syllable words.

- **Y spells long i:**
 - ~ **at the end of a one-syllable word:** my, fry, spy, shy, ply, why, spy
 - ~ **when the suffix “fy” ends a verb:** satisfy, glorify, clarify, dignify, electrify, horrify
 - ~ **at the end of a few two-syllable words, mostly verbs, with the stress on the second syllable:** deny, rely, defy, apply, awry, imply, ally
 - ~ **at the end of a syllable in a multi-syllable word, mostly words derived from Greek:** gynecologist, tyrant, gyrate, tycoon, cyclone, pylon, zygote
- **Y usually spells short i when it is in the middle of a syllable:** gym, abyss, acronym, acrylic, bicycle, catalyst, crypt, cylinder, dysfunctional, hieroglyphic, lymph, rhythmic, syllable.
- **Y spells long e when it is the only vowel at the end of a multi-syllable word** (with the exception of suffix “fy,” as shown above): happy, scary, lobby, fancy, ability, ably, originally, absently, academically

Finally, the letter w does not spell a vowel sound unless it is part of a vowel team. The letter w only spells a vowel sound when it is the second letter in a vowel team.

- **The letter w does not spell vowel sound by itself.**

Despite these complexities, the most important thing for struggling and beginning readers to know is that the letters y and w spell the consonant sounds when they are before the vowel and are part of the vowel team when they are after a vowel. Secondly they need to know that y can spell 3 vowel sounds (long e, short i, and long i) and the common spelling patterns in which y spells these vowel sounds.