

Should you teach syllable types?

by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.



Read this blogpost on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com):

<https://www.themeasuredmom.com/should-you-teach-syllable-types/>

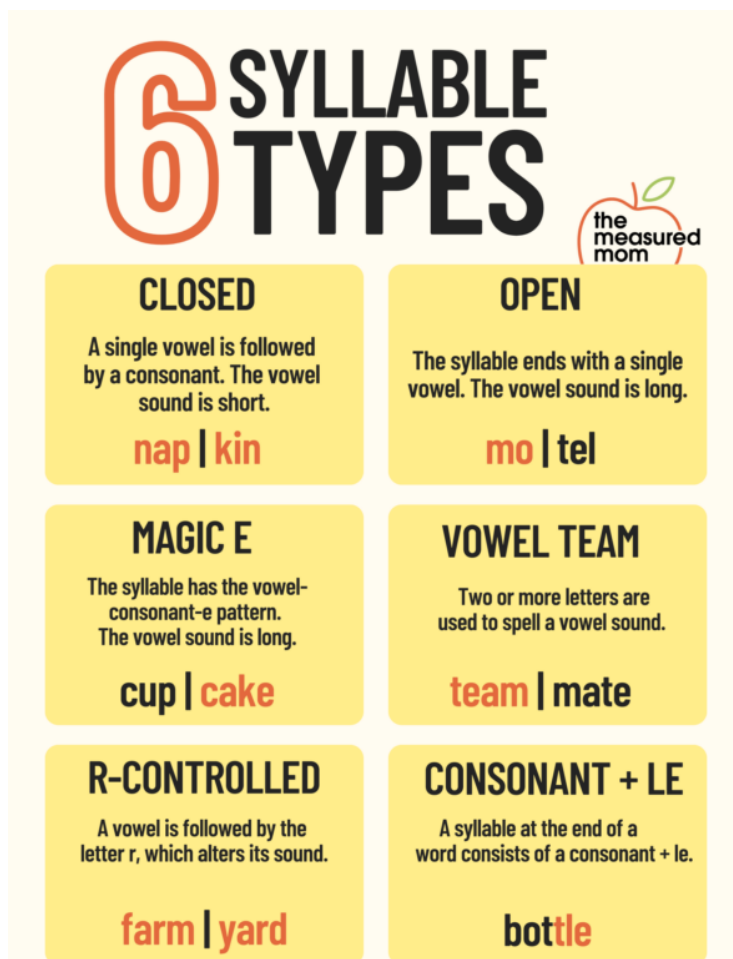
In this post we'll be looking at the six syllable types and considering the question: Should you teach them?

What are the syllable types?

Most written English syllables can be organized into six kinds of syllables (called syllable types) based on their spelling.

Because every syllable has a single vowel phoneme (sound), the syllable types are defined by the location and/or spelling of the vowel phoneme.

The chart below defines each type and gives an example in orange.



Variations

The “magic e” syllable type is also called the “vowel-consonant-e” or “CVCE” syllable type.

The “r-controlled” syllable type is also called “vowel-r.”

The “consonant-le” syllable may also be called the “final stable syllable.”

And some programs identify a seventh type: the “diphthong” syllable. Others include diphthong spellings with the “vowel team” syllable type.

What are the arguments *for* teaching syllable types?

1. When students learn to recognize syllable types, they can use this knowledge to help read longer words. I like to think of syllable types as opening the door to multi-syllable word reading. If a student can read closed and magic e syllables, they can read *cupcake*. If they can read r-controlled vowel syllables, they can read *further*.

2. Some programs (particularly those based on Orton-Gillingham) teach [syllable division rules](#). An understanding of syllable types is necessary for pronouncing each part of the word because syllable types help you know how to pronounce the vowel in each syllable.

3. Syllable types can also help students with their spelling.

For example, if an open syllable (la) is combined with a consonant+le syllable (dle), the d is not doubled.

On the other hand, if a closed syllable (rat) is combined with a consonant + le syllable (tle), a double consonant must result.

What does research say about teaching syllable types?

Not much. Programs that teach syllable types *and* programs that don’t teach syllable types have both shown positive outcomes.

What is the argument *against* teaching syllable types?

1. One reason not to teach syllable types is that they are not always consistent. The schwa, which is the common English vowel, often takes over a spelling in an open or closed syllable.

For example, in the word CACTUS, you would expect the closed syllable TUS to have a short vowel sound. Instead, you hear the schwa.

2. Some argue that syllable types are unnecessary when students are taught flexible syllable division strategies.

For example, when students read the word HABIT, they could break it apart by remembering that each syllable has a vowel. This may end up looking like HA – BIT. Even though syllable types tell us that this word should be pronounced hay-bit, students who don't know syllable types could simply try both the long and short vowel for the "a" in HA, eventually landing on the correct pronunciation.

3. We don't want to overwhelm students' working memory.

Some argue that teaching students to learn the names of syllable types is simply too much unnecessary information. We should save their working memory for the task of sounding out words, not storing extra information (like the names of the syllable types) that they don't need to be successful.

Final thoughts

Researcher Devin Kearns has written and spoken about syllable types and syllable division patterns. [His conclusion](#) is that syllable division patterns are so inconsistent that it is probably not worth our time to teach them.

As for syllable types, he thinks that teaching the most common syllable types, open and closed, is useful. But he prefers to call them "long vowel syllable" and "short vowel syllable." He questions whether it's important to teach the other syllable types.

In [this video presentation](#), Dr. Kearns explains his position and shares a more flexible approach to syllable types and syllable division.

As for me, I think teachers should know the six syllable types and teach students to read each syllable type.

However, I'm not convinced that students need to identify and label syllable types. In my experience, this has been time-consuming and may not give us a bigger bang for our buck than a more flexible approach.

To be clear – there is not much research on this. These are just my conclusions.

What do you think? Do you think it's important to teach the six syllable types?

For further reading

- [Six Syllable Types](#), by Louisa Moats & Carol Tolman
- [How Spelling Supports Reading](#), by Louisa Moats
- [7 Syllable Types for Reading and Spelling](#), by Mark Weakland
- [Syllable Types](#), by Sarah Paul
- [Phonics and Syllable Rules: Do We Need Them?](#) by Nora Chabazi
- [Does English Have Useful Syllable Division Patterns?](#) by Devin Kearns

More resources for you!

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