

## Proportion of Alternative Spellings of Vowel Sounds

Although the most common way of writing each vowel sound is with one letter, in a comparatively small proportion of words, the vowel sound is written with two letters (called vowel digraphs or vowel teams). Children often have difficulty knowing which vowels to use. The following calculations, compiled by Elsie Smelt (1976), were based on the Stanford Spelling Study (Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971). The study used more than “17,000 words (from a core vocabulary containing most of the words used by educated speakers and writers)” (Hanna et al., 1971, p.80). Teach children to rely on the most commonly used letter-sound correspondences.

| <b>The sound...</b> | <b>is written as...</b> | <b>in x% of words</b> | <b>Examples</b>                                 |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| /ā/                 | a, a-e                  | 80                    | mate, vacation (a consonant e & open syllables) |
|                     | ai                      | 9                     | nail, brain                                     |
|                     | ay                      | 6                     | day, stay                                       |
| /ē/*                | e, e-e                  | 72                    | me, zero, Pete                                  |
|                     | ee                      | 10                    | deep, seed                                      |
|                     | ea                      | 10                    | heat, cream                                     |
| /ī/                 | i, i-e                  | 74                    | pilot, hide                                     |
|                     | y                       | 14                    | try, fly  |
|                     | igh                     | 6                     | sigh, flight                                    |
| /ō/                 | o, o-e                  | 87                    | hobo, hope                                      |
|                     | oa                      | 5                     | boat, soap                                      |
|                     | ow                      | 5                     | low, slow                                       |
| /ū/                 | u, u-e                  | 90                    | cupid, tune, mute                               |
|                     | ew                      | 3                     | new, few  |
|                     | eu                      | 2                     | feud  |
|                     | ue                      | 2                     | due   |
| /ă/                 | a                       | 100                   | hat, map  |
| /ĕ/                 | e                       | 93                    | bet, step                                       |
|                     | ea                      | 4                     | head, breath                                    |
| /ĭ/                 | i                       | 73                    | hid   |
|                     | y                       | 23                    | funny, symphony*                                |
| /ŏ/                 | o                       | 95                    | hot, stop                                       |
| /ŭ/                 | u                       | 88                    | hut, fun  |

Adapted from: Smelt, E. (1976) *Speak, spell and read English* (p.102). Melbourne: Longman Australia.

\*Many dictionaries that were published prior to the 1980s gave the final letter *y* as in *funny* or *muddy* the short /ĭ/ sound. This grapheme is now pronounced more frequently as long /ē/, especially in the Midwest and western United States.

Cited in Henry, M. K. (2003). *Unlocking literacy: Effective decoding and spelling instruction*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing (p. 76); and Henry, M.K., & Redding, N.C. (2005) *Patterns for success in reading and spelling*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed, Inc. (pp. 215-216).