STAGE 5: INTRODUCING CONSONANT CLUSTERS

Once a child can confidently blend and segment CVC words with the first set of medial vowels begin to add consonant clusters to the activities.

Add in consonant clusters in the following order:

- Initial consonant clusters   e.g.   **sl**ap **st**op **tr**ip
- Final consonant clusters   e.g.   li**mp** fa**ct** ho**ld**
- Initial and final consonant clusters   e.g.   **cr**i**sp cr**a**mp st**o**mp**

PRONUNCIATION OF CONSONANT CLUSTERS

Make sure you contrast consonant clusters that may be causing confusion. If these are not picked up on now they will cause great confusion when spelling later. Children with almost imperceptible speech difficulties can end up with consistently incorrect spellings as they spell as they speak, e.g.

train	being pronounced **chr**ain or **tw**ain
drink	being pronounced **ji**nk or **dw**ink
through	being pronounced **fr**ew
grab	being pronounced **gw**ab

ORDER OF TEACHING

Because we are using a synesthetic system we want children to listen for individual sounds rather than rote learn consonant clusters. To do this we need to make sure that children are exposed to a whole range of consonant clusters at once, forcing them to use their listening skills. For this same reason it is important to begin with aural exercises where the focus is on the sounds rather than the letters in the word.

However, within consonant clusters there are some sounds that are much easier for children to work with than others. Consonant clusters containing long 'stretchy' sounds are the easiest, as are those where there is a clear change in mouth shape. Make sure you begin with those sounds that are easiest to distinguish.

Begin with long sounds where there are clear articulatory differences.

ha**nd**   **sm**ug   fi**lm**

Once the child is confident with these begin working with shorter, quieter sounds with less clear articulatory differences.

fa**ct**   **sw**im   ke**pt**

WHICH CONSONANT CLUSTERS TO TEACH

The simple answer is that synthetic phonics does not teach consonant clusters as such, but rather the skills needed to identify the sounds they are made up of. However, it is important to ensure that children encounter all the consonant clusters in English, and understand that there are some consonants that cluster together frequently, while others never appear in consonant clusters.

NONSENSE CLUSTERS

It is important that when you use nonsense words containing consonant clusters they only contain those clusters that exist in the English language in that position.

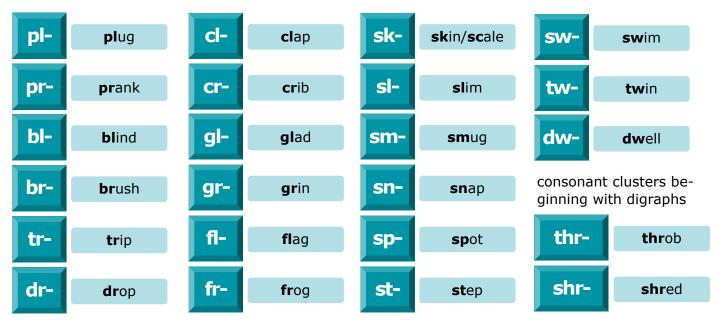✗ **nli**p /nl/ is not a consonant cluster found in the English language.

✗ **ld**et /ld/ is only ever a final consonant cluster, not an initial cluster.

INITIAL CONSONANT CLUSTERS

In English most initial consonant clusters are made of two sounds. There are only a handful of three sound clusters and they all begin with /s/. Avoid teaching using examples where consonant clusters cross syllables, as we want to encourage children to approach each syllable as a complete unit. Therefore avoid multisyllabic and compound words when working with consonant clusters.
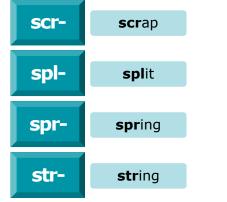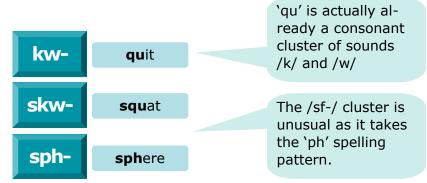
✗ ra**nd**om   ✗ rai**nb**ow

TWO CONSONANT CLUSTERS

pl- **pl**ug	**cl-** **cl**ap	**sk-** **sk**in/**sc**ale	**sw-** **sw**im
pr- **pr**ank	**cr-** **cr**ib	**sl-** **sl**im	**tw-** **tw**in
bl- **bl**ind	**gl-** **gl**ad	**sm-** **sm**ug	**dw-** **dw**ell
br- **br**ush	**gr-** **gr**in	**sn-** **sn**ap	consonant clusters beginning with digraphs
tr- **tr**ip	**fl-** **fl**ag	**sp-** **sp**ot	**thr-** **thr**ob
dr- **dr**op	**fr-** **fr**og	**st-** **st**ep	**shr-** **shr**ed

THREE CONSONANT CLUSTERS

scr- **scr**ap

spl- **spl**it

spr- **spr**ing

str- **str**ing

ANOMALOUS CONSONANT CLUSTERS
Avoid examples including these sounds.

kw- **qu**it

skw- **squ**at

sph- **sph**ere

'qu' is actually already a consonant cluster of sounds /k/ and /w/

The /sf-/ cluster is unusual as it takes the 'ph' spelling pattern.

CONFUSABLE PAIRS

Just like with minimal pairs, these pairs of consonant are easily confused. Ensure that children are able to differentiate between these pairs.

sn-	sm-	**sn**ug	**sm**ug
fr-	thr-	**fr**ee	**thr**ee
fl-	fr-	**fl**og	**fr**og
bl-	br-	**bl**ink	**br**ink
pl-	pr-	**pl**ay	**pr**ay
kl-	kr-	**cl**am	**cr**am
kr-	qu-	**kr**ill	**qu**ill

Remember the sound that is written 'qu' is actually the consonants /k/ and /w/ together. While children initially learn the spelling 'qu' with out any difficulty, it can cause confusion when we start teaching consonant clusters.

CONSONANT CLUSTER UNITS

Avoid using magnets or printed material that shows consonant clusters as single units. Consonant clusters are different from digraphs precisely because they are two units making two sounds. Discourage children from rote learning consonant cluster units and encourage them to really listen to hear the sounds instead. It will give them a skill set that they can use more efficiently.

THE LANGUAGE OF CONSONANT CLUSTERS

When describing the relationship between letters use emotive language and discuss them like animate beings. We want to bring letters alive and give them personalities as this makes them more engaging and therefore memorable. For example, some letters are friendly—like /s/ who likes being close to lots of other letters. Others are shy, like /f/, who is also quiet. Digraphs are two letters working together to make a single sound, whereas consonant clusters are just two letters close together, sometimes so close you can only just hear the sounds e.g. /lamp/. Ask the child, or better yet, children to act out the relationship between the sounds in the word.

HOW TO SUPPORT DIFFICULTIES WITH CONSONANT CLUSTERS

I find 'Walking the Word' an invaluable exercise at this point. It allows children to see where the sound is missing and allows partial success to be recognized. Many children struggle with this step so use mirrors and aural awareness activities to support them.

Holding Sounds is the idea that once a child has given the correct sound you will remember it for them. For instance if a child was trying to provide sounds for the word 'clamp' and had provided /c/, /l/, /a/, p/ you would hold these sounds while they focused on the missing sound. This is because it allows the child to focus entirely on identifying the missing sound without also remembering other sounds and their order. It reduces the cognitive load of the task and allows them to focus on the area of difficulty.
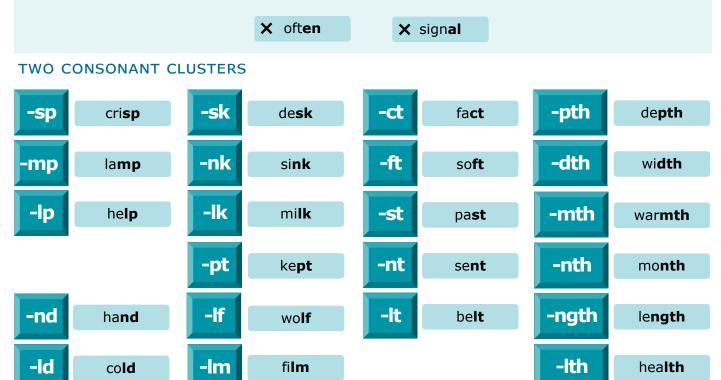
/c/	/l/	/a/	?	/p/

FINAL CONSONANT CLUSTERS

In English most final consonant clusters are made of two sounds. However, the most common consonant clusters are those created when adding plural and past tense endings. They end in the /s/, /z/, /t/ and /d/ sounds. They will be considered later when we begin building complex words, but for now should be avoided.
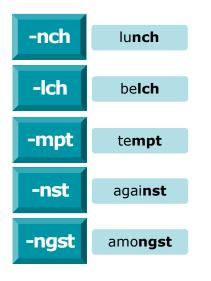
✗ bag**s**   ✗ cap**s**   ✗ lov**ed**   ✗ wish**ed**

There are also words that sound like they have consonant clusters at the end, but because of English spelling rules are actually spelled with an additional vowel. This is because every syllable in English must include a vowel. Sometimes these vowels are pronounced and other times they are not. These words often end in a /l/ or /n/ sound and will also be taught later.
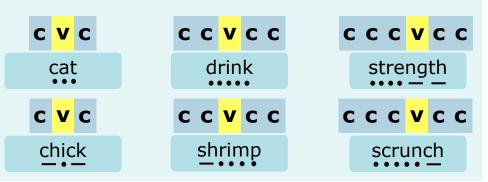
✗ oft**en**   ✗ sign**al**

TWO CONSONANT CLUSTERS

-sp	cri**sp**	-sk	de**sk**	-ct	fa**ct**	-pth	de**pth**
-mp	la**mp**	-nk	si**nk**	-ft	so**ft**	-dth	wi**dth**
-lp	he**lp**	-lk	mi**lk**	-st	pa**st**	-mth	war**mth**
		-pt	ke**pt**	-nt	se**nt**	-nth	mo**nth**
-nd	ha**nd**	-lf	wo**lf**	-lt	be**lt**	-ngth	le**ngth**
-ld	co**ld**	-lm	fi**lm**			-lth	hea**lth**

THREE CONSONANT CLUSTERS

-nch	lu**nch**
-lch	be**lch**
-mpt	te**mpt**
-nst	agai**nst**
-ngst	amo**ngst**

WHEN TO MOVE ON

At this stage children should be able to build CCVC and CVCC words with support. They should be able to identify all the sounds independently, but may need prompting when they have missed a sound out. They may occasionally need support in ordering the sounds within consonant clusters. They are not expected to read or write these words independently.

Many complex words have consonant clusters, and children will continue working on the skills of segmenting and blending consonant clusters throughout the rest of this programme.

DESCRIPTION AND SOUND BUTTONS

C V C	C C V C C	C C C V C C
cat	drink	strength
C V C	C C V C C	C C C V C C
chick	shrimp	scrunch

STAGE 5: ACTIVITIES

At this stage the focus is on developing the skills to blend and segment words containing consonant clusters. Many of the activities introduced earlier can also be used with words containing consonant clusters.
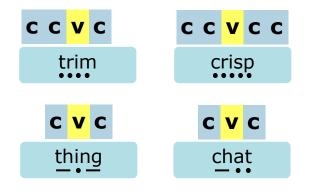
TEACHING CONSONANT CLUSTERS

Minimal pairs/groups also work really well for consonant clusters. Choose pairs of words that differ by just one sound for word games.

skim	–	**sl**im
sn**u**g	–	sm**u**g
lo**s**t	–	lo**f**t
sp**r**ing	–	st**r**ing

Avoid focusing on 'word family' games as these encourage the child to rote learn consonant cluster sounds. This strategy is unlikely to be helpful for children with literacy difficulties as it vastly increases the number of units they need to recognize. Instead use game formats that recombine consonants to make different clusters.

EXAMPLE CONSONANT CLUSTER ACTIVITIES

What's My Word – The child is given clues to help them identify a target word e.g. 'don't stand on a banana you might…'.They then build the word using magnetic letters. Use similar word groups so they recombine consonant clusters, e.g. 'slip', 'snip', 'snap', 'slap', 'slam'.

Investigation – Look through text (props like a magnifying glass can help) to find what letters can be in initial consonant clusters. Scribe a mind map to keep track of all the varieties they have found. Discuss which are rare and which are more common.

Tongue Twisters – Work together to generate a group of words containing the same consonant cluster and then try to make a sentence using as many of the words as possible. e.g. 'the slug slid slowly on his sled'.

Word Chains & Sound Counters – These are useful games when focusing on single sound changes consonant cluster words. e.g. 'sand', 'stand', 'strand'.

TEACHING NUMBER OF SOUNDS AND LETTERS

Explore the difference between the number of letters and sounds in a word. This helps highlight the difference between consonant clusters and digraphs. It is common for children to get confused when the number of sounds and letters in a word does not match as the relationship is 1-1 for simple CVC words. Use sound buttons to explore this relationship.

C	C	V	C

trim

C	C	V	C	C

crisp

C	V	C

thing

C	V	C

chat

EXAMPLE NUMBER OF SOUNDS VERSUS LETTERS ACTIVITIES

What's in the Box? – Provide clues to which is the correct answer using numbers, e.g. 'it has four letters but only three sounds', and provide options to choose from e.g. 'frog', 'ring', 'string'. Encourage the child to sound button the words to find the correct answer.

Pairs Game – Provide word pairs with different numbers of letters and sounds (from 2-5). Ask the child to match the pairs together. Encourage the child to use sound buttons.

Witches Cauldron – Read a spell which asks for things with a certain number of sounds or letters. Have a collection of suitably grizzly words for the child to select from and put in the cauldron. e.g. frog, bat, twig, sock, slug, bug etc.

Sound Circles – Build words where digraphs are shown by placing two counters on top of each other while consonant clusters are individual counters.