

What's Different about the Letterland Alphabet?

Preschool groups and Reception classes have always had alphabet friezes on their walls with pictures to support learning the a-z shapes and sounds. How is the Letterland alphabet different?

Let's take one example. The well known bat and ball picture for **b** is often placed beside or within the **b**. What can either the teacher or the children say about the letter or the bat and ball? Point out how the letter looks like a bat beside a ball? Yes. Emphasise the recurring sound in **bat** and **ball**? Yes. Say, "Make your straight line first for the bat. Then go round for the ball." Yes, and that's about it. The comparison doesn't usually extend to the capital B shape.

The Letterland picture for **b**, by comparison, presents a personality: a bouncy, furry brown bunny with

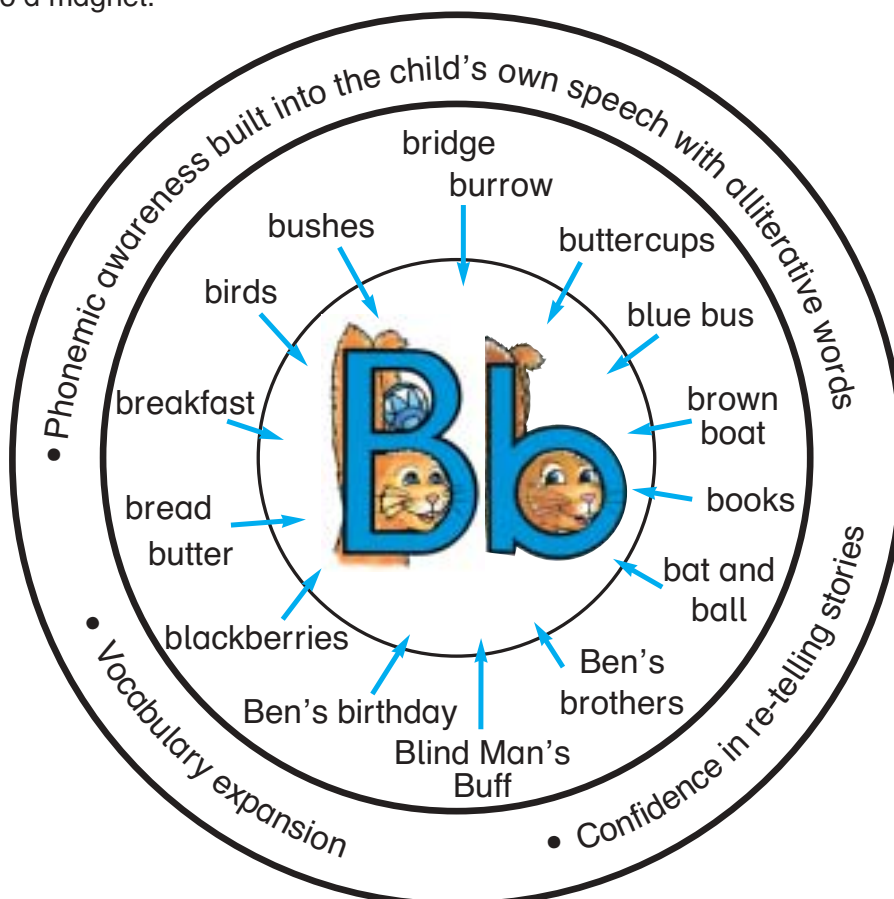
- a habit of **bouncing** only in the Reading Direction → → → →.
- a habit of **balancing** a **blue ball** between his ears (in the capital **B** shape).
- This **bunny** lives in a **burrow** by the Letterland **bridge** with his furry **brown brothers**.
- He loves to eat **blueberries**, **bread** and **butter**, **bananas**, in fact all things that begin with his sound.
- He is featured in stories that tell us more about this inhabitant of Letterland. (What does he want for his **birthday**? A **bat** and **ball** of course, and a **book**, a **blue boat**, etc.)



In fact the **b** and **B** pictures (the Letterland pictograms) spark off a continually expanding set of associations with those otherwise plain, black **b** and **B** shapes.

All of these associations *play with language* at a level especially appropriate to 3 to 5 year olds. Alliteration fuels the play. The children find "Bouncy Ben words" in the classroom, in the playground, or on a nature walk – things that Ben enjoys and they enjoy: **butterflies**, **bugs**, **bees**, **birds**, (one child even notices a **black bird!**) **bark** on the trees, **blue** in the sky, etc.

These **b**-words are their discoveries now. As the children link these words to the characters they stick, like iron filings to a magnet.



Another form of language strengthens the **a-z** associations too: *body language*. By playfully bouncing in the Reading Direction, making Bouncy Ben's sound with every bounce, each child develops strong kinesthetic and auditory links to the letter. A simple trick, 'Just start to say the Letterlander's name,' cues the correct letter sound. (This cueing strategy works for every letter.)

When a child has stroked Bouncy Ben's ears, (mimed by a friend's upraised arms) and drawn it in the air around his head, there is much more to remember than the tiny finger movements



any child makes while holding a pencil and practising the plain letter 'bee' stroke. The children can even sing about how to form each letter shape. The handwriting song for **b** guides the child with a body analogy:

Brush down Ben's big long ears.
Go up round his head so his face appears.



The pictograms create a new *pictorial language* too, one that any child can 'speak'. The children confirm the body analogy, in this case, just by adding a face and whiskers. They are using their own artwork as a hands-on mapping device, thereby *alerting themselves* to the letter's shape and orientation. Their picture coding brings the letter to life, and the process ensures that they take ownership of it.

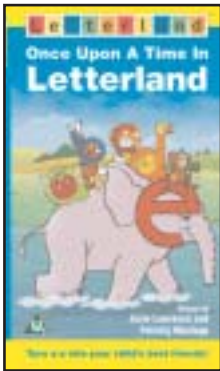
In contrast to the bat and ball image, all these associations establish a lingering effect. Not only does the 'live' character, 'Bouncy Ben', linger on in the children's minds when the picture of him is gone. Their memory has also been strengthened by the wealth of other visual / auditory / kinesthetic associations. They now have vivid ideational associations as well, and these bind together the input from all their sensory channels.

Each Letterland pictogram has also become the stimulus for an affective relationship to the letter, in the same way that children grow to love Peter Rabbit or any other favourite character in a book. As a result, a heightened awareness of **b**'s sound in both living and written speech grows out of this multi-focus on the plain letter shape, transformed now into a child's friend, living in a secret place called Letterland. Each personified letter becomes a motivator for exploring all the other letter shapes and sounds, too, because now even the youngest pre-school age level children actually WANT TO KNOW all about them.



Initially the stories about the Letterlanders feature one letter only, and their plots turn on alliterative words. But the children soon progress to stories involving several characters and the many adventures they share.





On three full animation videos they also watch all 26 letters involved in special a-z adventures. In 'Once Upon a Time in Letterland' Monkey gradually discovers how it is that letters can get together and make words!

So if we ask ourselves again, 'What's different about the Letterland alphabet?' we probably have to say that the most salient differences are 1) its potential for activating all sensory learning channels and 2) its ability to capture the children's hearts and minds and their full attention in the critical period of their lives when learning to access print becomes vital for their whole future.



Knowing a-z and being able to read regular 3 and 4 letter words, however, is not going to take a beginner reader very far. English contains 44 sounds represented by the same 26 letters grouped into very specific sequences. Research has made it clear that phonic knowledge needs to include all the frequently recurring letter clusters which represent those additional sounds (e.g. **sh**, **ch**, **ow**, **ou**, **ar**, **igh**, **ous**, etc.). There are over 80 essential spelling patterns. Just to complicate matters, many are *alternative ways* to represent the *same* sound (*how* / *house*, *she* / *action*, etc.). This added learning load leads us to a third and major difference between Letterland and other systems for learning the alphabet.



The new sounds (which contradict first learning) are not taught as exceptions to the rule, but as brief stories. Take **h** and **s**, for example. First the children learn that Harry the Hat Man always *whispers* his sound in words, like this: 'hhh...' because he hates noise, while Sammy Snake (s) likes to make a hissing noise in words like this: 'sss...' With this information Letterland has already laid the foundation for learning the completely different **sh** sound as well.



How? A high-usage word like **she** is a good starting point. Why aren't Sammy Snake and the Hat Man making their usual sounds in this word? Well, what do we already know about the Hat Man? We know he hates noise, don't we! So when Sammy slides right up to him, hissing away as usual, what do you think the Hat Man might do? Yes! He turns back and hushes Sammy up with a 'sh!' sound. The children love miming this story. Confusions between **sh** and **ch**, usually so typical among beginners, are rare because each digraph has its own story logic. Other systems for learning the alphabet (e.g. **s** for sun, **h** for house, **c** for cake) typically, contain no scope for future learning.



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There is a simple story explanation like the **sh** one for every major spelling pattern a child needs to know. The children even teach these stories spontaneously to their little brothers and sisters. By now vast numbers of children in the UK from age 3 upwards know and readily remember the sound of **sh**. Why? Because the distance between the plain, black abstract symbols and their variable sounds has been removed. Learning the phonic facts has been turned into child's play because children love knowing why.

So this third difference is an economy of learning, as new facts are built on old ones. The overall result is an acceleration in effective learning and early success in reading. Large numbers of preschools and play groups across the United Kingdom now introduce the Letterland alphabet playfully at 3 and 4 years old. Many of them are reading before they are 5 or 5^{1/2}.