Using the Phonogram Alphabet

This alphabet is meant to be used alongside the Movable Alphabet. By offering the children all of the letters in our alphabet along with all of the key sounds of our language as represented by these double letter phonograms, children have the possibility of writing anything they want to write well before their hand can hold a pencil. Before one can have success with writing by way of the hand, one must be able to build words in the mind. This is the intellectual component of writing. It refers to the ability to put letters together to create a word. It can be done even if one has no muscular control of the hands. As such, this intellectual component of writing may develop even before the hand is able to hold a pencil. The movable alphabet gives children the opportunity to use their minds in this capacity without waiting for the hand. It provides a critical bridge between pencil writing and the intellectual formation of words. With a selection of letters before them, children do not need to sort through their entire memory of written symbols (which include numbers and graphical representations) to find what they seek. With the phonograms already formed, they also do not need to go through the additional step of building a digraph. There is a limited selection before them which increases their possibility of success. Thus, we can give the children a gradual path to follow as they master writing. They can take baby steps, build on their success, and build their confidence along the way.

Before you Begin
Before introducing the phonogram alphabet to a child, be sure the child has had ample practice with the green phonogram sandpaper letters and has met the prerequisites for writing (see Movable Alphabet lesson plan for details). In general, we don't worry about the accuracy of the spelling until around age 6. The point of early writing, of phonetically spelling words, is for the child to practice using the letters of our alphabet and expressing thoughts with written words. The more the child works at creating words, the easier it becomes. As she gains confidence with this process, she slowly begins to refine her skills and to develop her own voice. We do not wish to discourage her along this path and at the same time, we must guard the child's need for perfection. Some children show an early facility with language. They may seek out spelling corrections at an early age. We must meet the child at her developmental stage. If she wants correct spellings, we give them to her but if she is satisfied with phonetic spellings, that is just fine. Spelling is something that the child will naturally refine as her language abilities grow. It is not our focus at this stage of development.

Preparing the Alphabet
The alphabet needs to be contained in a box that easily displays each collection of letters and is usable by the young child. A lid is preferred to keep the letters dust free. If you purchased our craft box, set up the dividers as shown in the photo above. Store the alphabet where the child can get it without help.

1. Finding and Replacing Letters in the Box
1. Find a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Show the child how to carry the alphabet box and place it before her.
2. Say, "This is how you open and close the box." Show the child carefully and then give her a turn.
3. Say, "Let's get it ready." Open the box and straighten the letters by using your index finger to push each pile all the way to the left of it's compartment.
4. Say, "Let's see if we can find the 'ch' sound." Start scanning through the letters, starting at the top left and proceeding to the right, row by row. Using your index finger and thumb, carefully take the top letter ch and place it in front of the box.
5. Encourage the child to find a few more phonograms, remove them, and place them in front of the box (each in its own space). This is your test to make sure the child knows enough sounds to proceed to Lesson II *(next page)* after mastering this lesson (children usually need many days practicing this lesson before moving on to the next one).
6. Say, "Now I'll show you how we put them back so carefully." Demonstrate carefully and then give the child a turn with the other sounds.
7. Say, "You're so careful with these letters! You can take them out and put them back as much as you like."
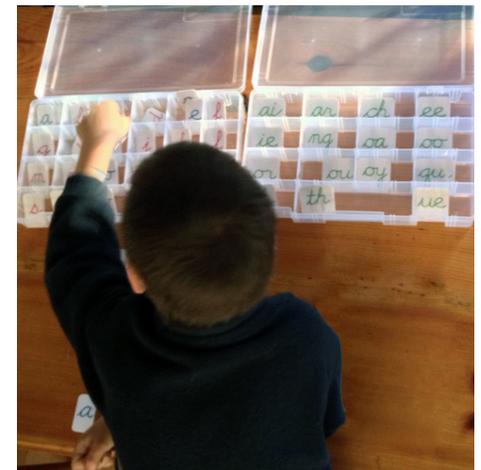
2. Writing the First Words

1. Find a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Place the standard and phonogram alphabet boxes next to each other in the top left corner of your work rug.
2. Say, "This weekend I was blowing bubbles with my niece. It was so delightful. I want to write that story down. Let's write the word bubbles." Slowly articulate each sound in the word. Say, "Let's see if we can find that first sound." Sound out the word again and isolate the "b" sound. Look at the letters slowly, discover the b, and place it on the work rug, just below the alphabet box *(see photo)*. Continue until the whole word is written. Be careful to proceed slowly enough so that the child is able to step in but quickly enough to maintain attention.
3. Say, "Oh, I liked doing that. Let's write more of my story. This weekend I was blowing bubbles with my niece." Pause to give the child a chance to choose the word to write next. If not, you can suggest one. "Let's write niece. This time you can do it!" Help the child if she needs it. When looking for the "ee" sound, help the child find it in the phonogram alphabet box. If the child instead starts building the ee using two of the single letter e's, that is no problem. Spelling does not count at this stage.
4. Continue to write as many words from this or another story as the child would like but be sure to stop before fatigue sets in. You want to leave her loving this work and wanting more. When you're done, celebrate the accomplishment, "Look at the story we've written!"
5. Clean up by saying, "Which one is your favorite sound? Let's put all of those away first." Do this for each letter/phonogram.
6. Say, "You could do this again tomorrow and write another story. I wonder what you'll write…" If the child is not ready to work independently, work with her again until she is able to do it alone. Slowly make your presence less and less necessary.
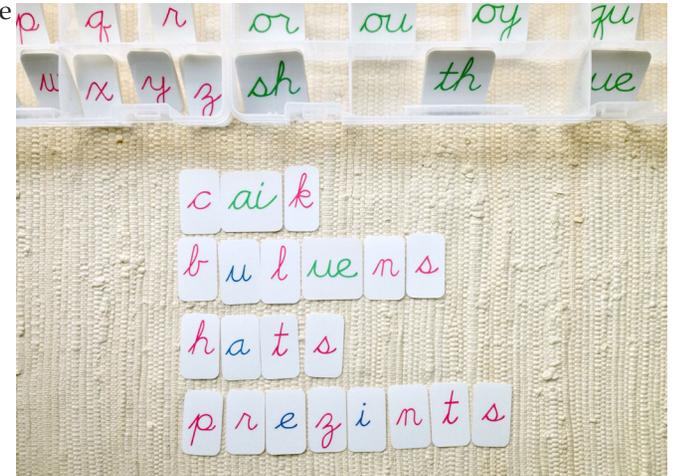
3. Writing Lists

As soon as the children know enough sounds, you have the critical and essential task of encouraging and inspiring them to use the alphabet to write what THEY want to write. You might notice how much they love eating snack and you could say, "I wonder if you could write down the names of all of your favorite snacks." Encourage them to do this with all kinds of categories of things. It is this grouping of concepts into categories that forms a strong foundation for logic and critical thinking. If they are telling you a story, you might say, "Oh this is so interesting but I just don't even have a moment right now. Can you write it down for me so I can read it later? I don't want to miss it!" Set an example by using the alphabet to write notes for the children who have begun to read. It's also not a problem if they are spelling the word shoe with the ue phonogram. We are focused on process and not product at this stage. Once the child begins reading, work with the phonetic folders (by Muriel Dwyer) will help refine spelling abilities.

4. Writing the Child's Topics

This is the same as Exercise III above but now frees the child to work with phrases and complete thoughts. Instead of just writing sneaker, you can encourage her to write, "I hav nue sneekrs." How exciting! At this point, the child may stop relying on the phonogram alphabet and begin building the phonograms on his own. Allow them to use the phonogram alphabet as much or as little as they need. This is also when you can start to correct spelling. Say, "That is how that word *sounds* like it is spelled. This is the way it is spelled. Everyone got together and agreed on one way to spell every word in the whole language. When you spell it this way, everyone knows which word you mean." Then, gently correct the spelling. Don't do too much at once!