

Relative frequency
of
English spellings

by
Godfrey Dewey, Ed.D.

TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York

Table 2 Reconciliation of:

Revised Scientific Alphabet (RSA), 48 phonemes —
 employed for primary analysis of 100,000-word corpus of both
 frequency studies
 Simplified Spelling Board (SSB) Fonetic Key Alfabet, 41 phone-
 mes-plus-*the* —
 employed for most tables of syllables and sounds in *RF/Sounds*
 Simpler Spelling Association (SSA) Phonemic Alphabet, 41 phone-
 mes-plus-*the* —
 employed in most tables (all but Appendixes A, B, and C) in
 this study

	Consonants		
	RSA 48 phonemes	SSB 41 phonemes	SSA 41 phonemes
<i>As in</i>			
<i>pin, cup</i>	p	—	—
<i>bin, cub</i>	b	—	—
<i>ten, bet</i>	t	—	—
<i>den, bed</i>	d	—	—
<i>come, back</i>	k	—	—
<i>gum, bag</i>	g	—	—
<i>fan, safe</i>	f	—	—
<i>van, save</i>	v	—	—
<i>thigh, bath, thin</i>	th	h	h̥
<i>thy, bathe, this</i>	th	h̥	h (8)
<i>seal, race</i>	s	—	—
<i>zeal, raise</i>	z	—	—
<i>shall, assure, rush</i>	sh	ʃ	—
<i>jabot, azure, rouge</i>	ʒ	—	—
<i>choke, rich, church</i>	ch	ʃ	ç
<i>joke, ridge, judge</i>	j	—	—
<i>met, him</i>	m	—	—
<i>net, thin</i>	n	—	—
<i>ink, thing</i>	ŋ	—	—
<i>laid, deal</i>	l	—	—
<i>raid, dear</i>	r	—	—
<i>wet, we</i>	w	—	—
<i>yet, ye</i>	y	—	—
<i>head, he</i>	h	—	—
	Vowels		
<i>am, pat</i>	a	a (1)	a (9)
<i>air, care, there</i>	ā *	—	—
<i>ask, fast, path</i>	a *	—	—

	RSA 48 phonemes	SSB 41 phonemes	SSA 41 phonemes
<i>As in</i>			
<i>artistic, cartoon</i>	ɑ	ɑ (2)	—
<i>art, alms, father</i>	ā *	—	—
<i>edge, let</i>	e	—	—
<i>age, late, may</i>	ē	ē	ɛ (10)
<i>any, habit, cities</i>	ɪ *	—	—
<i>is, sit</i>	i	i (3)	—
<i>ease, seat, me</i>	ɪ	ɪ	ɛ
<i>odd, not, was</i>	ə	—	ɒ
<i>or, haul, pshaw</i>	ø	ø	ɔ
<i>up, ton, but</i>	ʊ	u (4)	u (11)
<i>burn, her, first, work</i>	ʊ *	—	—
<i>about, over, data</i>	ə	ə (5)	ə (12)
<i>obey, poetic, window</i>	o	o (6)	—
<i>open, note, show</i>	ō *	—	—
<i>full, good, should</i>	u	—	—
<i>fool, food, shoe</i>	ū	ū	u
	Diphthongs		
<i>aisle, pint, by</i>	ai	i	—
<i>oil, point, boy</i>	oi	ɛ	i
<i>owl, pound, bough</i>	au	ai	—
<i>duration, futility</i>	iu	ü (7)	iu
<i>pure, feud, beauty</i>	iū *	—	—
	Wordsign		
<i>the</i>	(thī, thɪ, thə) **	h̥i	h̥ə

Notes

- * RSA symbol eliminated in SSB and SSA alphabets
- ** Dictionaries give three pronunciations. Wordsign in SSB and SSA — Same form and signification as symbol at left
- (1) Includes **ɑ** (*air*) and **ɑ** (*ask*)
- (2) Includes **ā** (*art*)
- (3) Includes high front unstressed vowel "schwi" **ɪ** (*any*)
- (4) Includes **ʊ** (*burn*)
- (5) Includes only unstressed schwa **ə** (*about*)
- (6) Includes **ō** (*open*)
- (7) Includes **ü** (*pure*)
- (8) Represents *voiced*, not unvoiced, *th*
- (9) Includes vowel of *ask*, but not vowel of *air*
- (10) Represents vowel of *age*, including vowel of *air*
- (11) Includes only vowel of *but*, not including stressed schwa of *burn*
- (12) Includes both unstressed schwa of *over* and stressed schwa of *burn*

Table 3 Relative frequency of English phonemes

On the 41 phonemes-plus-*the* basis of the SSA phonemic alphabet
Arranged in order of frequency of occurrences

Pho- neme	Occur- % rences	Spell- Items ings	Pho- neme	Occur- % rences	Spell- Items ings					
i	8.04	29,283	20	f	1.89	6,889	1,131	7		
n	7.40	26,982	4,411	9	h	1.86	6,759	484	3	
t	7.30	26,609	4,496	9	b	1.84	6,721	1,152	2	
r	7.00	25,471	5,424	10	u	1.72	6,273	1,118	10	
s	4.68	17,081	4,162	9	o	1.67	6,091	1,188	19	
d	4.32	15,723	3,052	4	w	1.66	6,051	322	19	
ə	4.12	15,024	3,273	23	ɪ	1.64	5,961	859	14	
l	3.82	13,940	3,274	7	h	1.49	5,447	113	1	
a	3.80	13,852	1,565	4	ɔ	1.27	4,691	442	13	
e	3.50	12,709	3,172	10	ŋ	.98	3,550	1,035	3	
z	3.04	11,089	2,063	7	ʃ	.84	3,045	850	15	
ɒ	2.89	10,521	1,103	7	g	.77	2,794	636	4	
m	2.82	10,281	1,820	5	u	.71	2,577	466	11	
k	2.75	10,010	2,680	11	au	.64	2,312	256	5	
v	2.31	8,417	905	4	y	.62	2,260	250	6	
ɑ	2.15	7,770	1,446	19	c	.53	1,931	348	5	
w	2.12	7,741	553	5	a	.50	1,831	332	9	
p	2.09	7,638	1,967	2	j	.44	1,582	492	10	
ɪə	2.00	7,310	1	1	h	.38	1,396	213	2	
ɛ	1.95	7,114	834	20	ɪw	.31	1,138	322	10	
					ɪ	.09	347	105	3	
					ɜ	.05	170	52	5	
					24 consonants	61.34	223,526	41,563	145	
					17 vowels	36.66	133,545	22,765	216	
					ɪə	2.00	7,310	1	1	
					TOTALS	42	100.00	364,381	64,329	362

phoneme is most often spelt in the language";¹ ignoring the aspect of the most frequent pronunciations of the graphemes thus selected. The result of this half-portion definition was that, by his criteria, 72 different pronunciations of the non-sense word *asefo* would be rated as *completely* regular, and

¹ W. R. Lee, *Spelling irregularity and reading difficulty in English* (London: The National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, 1960), p. 26.

Table 4 Relative frequency of letters in English

Arranged in order of frequency

Letter	Percent	Occur- rences	Items
e	12.68	55,465	9,493
t	9.78	42,815	5,366
a	7.88	34,536	5,352
o	7.76	33,993	4,305
i	7.07	30,955	6,058
n	7.06	30,902	5,480
s	6.31	27,642	6,069
r	5.94	26,051	5,569
h	5.73	25,138	1,634
l	3.94	17,261	3,668
d	3.89	17,046	3,394
u	2.89	12,285	2,448
c	2.68	11,747	3,148
f	2.56	11,199	1,164
m	2.44	10,678	1,916
w	2.14	9,396	712
y	2.02	8,837	1,189
g	1.87	8,191	2,079
p	1.86	8,162	2,154
b	1.56	6,838	1,207
v	1.02	4,481	907
k	.60	2,610	526
x	.16	687	214
j	.10	421	117
q	.09	403	122
z	.06	284	131
TOTALS	100.00	438,023	74,422

152 more pronunciations would be rated in his A group as relatively regular!

In studying Table 5 which follows, the ratios, especially of graphemes to phonemes, shown in the summary, will be found instructive.

Tables 7 and 8, in the next chapter, are also pertinent here, but as their data, like those of Table 6, Pronunciations of spellings, are broken down by form of grapheme, they are more appropriately considered there.