Years 5 & 6 · Free resource

The *-ough* letter string

Year group: 5/6
Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 5–6
Curriculum requirement: Statutory **Purpose:** Years 5–6 guide to the -ough spelling pattern — the six different sounds it represents, statutory word list, and practice activities.

The rule

The letter string *-ough* is one of the most notorious in English because it represents **at least seven different sounds**. There is no reliable rule for predicting which sound applies — the pronunciations must be learned word by word, grouped by sound family.

The key insight for teaching: **group the words by sound, not by spelling.** When children see that *though*, *although*, and *dough* all rhyme, and that *through* rhymes with *blue*, the pattern becomes memorable.

The seven sounds of *-ough*

1. *-ough* = /oʊ/ (like "oh")

Word	Meaning
though	**even if; despite the fact that**
although	**even though**
dough	**uncooked bread mixture**
borough	**a town or district**
furlough	**leave of absence**

Memory hook: "THOUGH the DOUGH is in the BOROUGH, I'll go there ALTHOUGH it's far."

2. *-ough* = /uː/ (like "oo")

Word	Meaning
through	**from one side to the other; by means of**
throughout	**all the way through**

Memory hook: "THROUGH the hoop — all the way OO!"

3. *-ough* = /ʌf/ (like "uff")

Word	Meaning
rough	not smooth; harsh
tough	strong; hard to cut or break
enough	as much as needed
slough	a marshy area; to shed (skin)

Memory hook: "ENOUGH is TOUGH — it's ROUGH going!"

4. *-ough* = /ɒf/ (like "off")

Word	Meaning
cough	to expel air from lungs
trough	a long container for animal feed or water

Memory hook: "A COFFin in a TROUGH — OF course!"

5. *-ough* = /ɔː/ (like "aw")

Word	Meaning
thought	past tense of think
bought	past tense of buy
brought	past tense of bring
fought	past tense of fight
sought	past tense of seek
ought	should
nought	zero; nothing
wrought	shaped by hammering; caused (wrought iron)

Memory hook: These are all past-tense verbs (mostly) with the "aw" sound. Think: "I THOUGHT, BOUGHT, BROUGHT, FOUGHT, SOUGHT."

6. *-ough* = /aʊ/ (like "ow" — rhymes with "cow")

Word	Meaning
plough	a farming tool for turning soil; to move forward with effort
bough	a branch of a tree
drought	a long period without rain
slough	(alternative pronunciation) to shed skin

Memory hook: "The PLOUGH on the BOUGH during the DROUGHT" — all rhyme with "cow."

7. *-ough* = /ə/ (unstressed "uh" — in some accents)

Word	Meaning
thorough	**complete; careful and detailed**
borough	**(some accents) a district**

Memory hook: "THOROUGH" — the -ough is a weak unstressed ending.

Summary table

Sound	Words
/oʊ/ (oh)	though, although, dough, borough
/uː/ (oo)	through, throughout
/ʌf/ (uff)	rough, tough, enough
/ɒf/ (off)	cough, trough
/ɔː/ (aw)	thought, bought, brought, fought, sought, ought, nought
/aʊ/ (ow)	plough, bough, drought
/ə/ (uh)	thorough

Etymology note

The letter string *-ough* represents Old English *-oh* or *-ōh*, which originally had the /x/ sound (like the *ch* in Scottish *loch*). Over centuries, as the /x/ sound disappeared from English, different regions and dialects pronounced what remained differently. The spelling was fixed in the late Middle Ages before pronunciation stabilised — which is why one spelling now represents seven sounds. The *-ough* words are a fossil of medieval pronunciation diversity preserved in modern spelling.

Common mistakes

Wrong	Right	Sound
tho / *altho*	though / although	/oʊ/ — informal abbreviation, not standard
enuff	enough	/ʌf/
thru	through	/uː/ — informal only
truely thorough	truly thorough	/ə/ — but *thorough* itself is often misspelled *thorogh*
plow	plough	/aʊ/ — American spelling; British is *plough*
draught (for dry spell)	drought	these are different words — *draught* = a current of air or a beer measure

Word sort

Sort these words by the sound -ough makes. Use the sound families above.

Words: though · through · rough · cough · thought · plough · enough · although · brought · tough · drought · thorough · bought · dough · bough · nought

/oʊ/	/uː/	/ʌf/	/ɒf/	/ɔː/	/aʊ/	/ə/

Dictation sentences

Though it was **rough**, she was **tough enough** to get **through** the competition.

She **thought** she had **bought** enough **dough** to last the week, **although** she was **thorough** in her planning.

The farmer guided the **plough** through the field during the **drought**, thinking of **nought** but the harvest.

His **cough** was **tough** to treat, **though** the doctor had **sought** the right medicine.

Throughout the storm, the old **bough** bent but did not break.

Classroom display idea

Create a "Sounds of -ough" wall chart with one word per sound family, arranged by sound. Children add examples as they find them in their reading. The chart becomes a shared class reference.

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013), which explicitly cites the -ough letter string in the Years 5–6 statutory content. All examples verified against standard British English usage.

Don't just download it — let them practise it

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Related reading

- The science of spelling: how children learn to spell →
- Year 5 and 6 statutory words list →