Sometimes a Vowel Is Not a Vowel, and
Sometimes a Consonant Is

Today's language arts textbooks define the English vowels as <a>, <e>, <i>, <o>, <u>, and sometimes <y>. But that definition is not true to our alphabet, neither its history nor its current use. And it subverts some of the most powerful and useful patterns and rules for helping us teach our students how to read and spell. We need a historically accurate and less subversive definition of vowels.

One of the patterns that the current definition subverts is the distinction between VCCV (vowel-consonant-consonant-vowel) letter strings with short first vowels and VCV (vowel-consonant-vowel) strings with long first vowels. The distinction is crucial to our students as they read and spell pairs like

vccv		vcv
canned	vs.	caned
capped		caped
hopping		hoping
planner		planer
robbing		robing
stripped		striped
twinned		twined

One of the rules motivated by this VCCV-VCV distinction deals with doubling the final consonant of words when adding suffixes to them, as in *twin + n + ing = twinning.* Since the word *twinning* itself contains an example of the process, it is helpful to refer to this doubling procedure as **twinning**. A statement of the basic twinning rule is that when you add a suffix that starts with a vowel to a one-syllable word that ends in a final single consonant letter preceded by a single vowel letter, you twin the final consonant—as in,

twin + ing = twin + n + ing = twinning
vccv

Since it produces the VCCV pattern marking a short vowel, this twinning rule is very powerful and useful to both readers and spellers. But if we follow the current definition and treat <u> as always a vowel, why is there twinning in a word like *quitter*? The <ui> in *quit* would run counter to the twinning rule's demand for a single vowel. That single-vowel demand is what restrains us from twinning in words like *deafen, cookie, daubed, tautest*, but still we twin in *quitter, quizzed,* and *squatted.* On the other hand, if <w> is always a consonant, why don't we twin it in words like *fewer*? To address such questions calls for a closer look at our definition of vowels.

Vowel Letters and Sounds
There are two ways of thinking about vowels: as **vowel letters** and as **vowel sounds**. Letters are things of the written language, things you see. Sounds are things of the spoken language, things you hear. It is useful to mark them differently when we represent them in writing. Thus, we put letters inside arrowhead brackets, sounds inside square brackets. The vowel **letter** in the word *cat* we represent as **<a>** and call, logically enough, by its alphabet name. The vowel **sound** in *cat* we represent as **[a]** and call by its actual sound or by the name **short <a>.**

Vowel Sounds
The long and short vowel sounds commonly recognized for English can be summarized as follows:

Short Vowels	Long Vowels
[a], pat	[ā], bait
[e], pet	[ē], beet
[i], pit	[ī], bite
[o], pot[1]	[ō], boat
[u], puck	[ū], coot
[ʊ], push	[yū], cute

Vowel Letters
Since the alphabet's original function was to represent in written signs the sounds of the spoken language, it makes sense to say that a letter is a vowel letter when it is spelling a vowel sound, a consonant letter when it is spelling a consonant sound. Four letters always spell vowel sounds and thus are always vowel letters: <a>, <e>, <i>, <o>. However, over the many centuries that our English alphabet has been evolving, three other letters — <y>, <u>, and <w> — have done double duty, sometimes spelling vowel sounds, sometimes spelling consonant sounds.

Double Duty of the Letters <y>, <u>, and <w>
The letter <y> has always been used in English to spell vowel sounds, substituting freely with <i>. In the 13th century scribes began to replace the native English letter yogh <ȝ> with <y> to spell the consonant sound [y]. Thus, for instance, *ȝell* became *yell*

[1]There are at least two English vowel sounds that are collapsed into one in the above treatment of short <o>, [o]. The second of the two is the dotted <o> sound, [ȯ], that is exemplified in some dialects by words such as *caught* and *stalk*, in contrast with the [o] in *cot* and *stock*. Since the distinction between [o] and [ȯ] is not crucial to the present discussion, it seems better to collapse the two into one and thus avoid some distracting complications.

and *ȝear* became *year.* Since the Romans had often used <i> to spell the [y] sound, and since in early English <i> and <y> were substituted one for the other, choosing <y> to replace <ȝ> in spelling [y] was a natural enough step. Today <y> continues to spell the consonant sound [y] at the beginning of a syllable, as in *yell, year,* or *beyond*. Most of the time, however, <y> still spells a vowel sound, as it does at the end of words, usually spelling an unstressed long <e> sound as in *navy, many, motherly*, or as part of a digraph, as in *bay, buy, boy*. Occasionally, usually in words that come from Greek, <y> spells long or short <i> sounds in the middle of words, as in *type* and *syllable*. So, more or less consistent with the current definition, though sometimes a consonant, <y> is usually a vowel letter.

The letter <u> developed late in the Roman alphabet, and for a long time it and the letter from which it was adapted, <v>, were used interchangeably, to spell both vowel and consonant sounds. In Latin the combination consonant sound [kw] was spelled <qu> or <qv>; in Middle English these spellings replaced the native English <cw>, so that, for instance, Old English *cwēn, cwene* became *qveen, queen.* Up through the 16th century, <u> and <v> still served double duty, with <v> used in word-initial position while <u> was used everyplace else, and each still could spell either vowel sounds or the consonant sound [v]. For instance, Richard Mulcaster, the 16th century language arts specialist, spelled *usual* <vsuall> and *observe* <obserue>. It wasn't until the 17th century that it was decided that <v> would spell only the consonant sound [v] and that <u> would usually spell vowel sounds. So, contrary to the current definition, though usually a vowel, <u> is sometimes a consonant letter, as when in words like *quit* and *language* it spells [w]. In a number of words from French and Spanish the sound spelled by <qu> simplified from [kw] to [k], as in *mosquito, turquoise, quiche, bouquet, antique*. We treat any <u> that comes right after <q> as a consonant.

Back in the 7th century when the Roman alphabet was adapted to write English, there was a [w] sound in English but no <w> letter in the Roman alphabet. In Old English [w] had been spelled with the runic character wynn, roughly <ƿ>. In later Latin <u> had been used to spell the consonant sound [w], but since in English the single <u> was already serving double duty, English scribes doubled it to represent the English sound [w]. In time the <uu> merged into the modern ligatured form, <w>, still called “double <u>.” But in addition to its use for spelling the [w] sound, <w> came to be used in some vowel digraphs that were also often spelled with <u>: <aw> and <au> (as in *paw* and *pause*), <ew> and <eu> (as in *few* and *feud*), and <ow> and <ou> (as in *bow* and *bout*). So, again contrary to the current definition, though usually a consonant, in a few digraphs <w> is a vowel letter.

Vowels Redefined and Twinning Made More Reliable

The foregoing histories have led to the double duty served today by <y>, <u>, and <w>, which can be summarized as follows:

The letter <y> is a consonant only at the beginning of syllables when it spells the consonant [y] sound that it spells in *yell*; everyplace else it is a vowel.

The letter <u> is a vowel when it spells vowel sounds such as [u], [ʊ], [ū], [yū] and in the vowel digraphs <au>, <eu>, <ui>, <ou>; it is a consonant in only two situations: (i) when it spells the consonant sound [w], as in *language* and *pueblo*.; and (ii) when it follows the letter <q>, whether it spells [w], as in *quit*, or does not, as in *quay, mosquito* and *plaque*.

The letter <w> is usually a consonant; it is a vowel only in the vowel digraphs <aw>, <ew>, and <ow>, as in *craw, crew,* and *crow.*

This double duty has been recognized for centuries. It was described, for instance, in the 16th century by Richard Mulcaster in his language arts text, *The Elementarie*; in the 18th century in Samuel Johnson's dictionary, and in the 19th century in Noah Webster's dictionaries and his popular spelling-reading texts. In any case, today's vowel letters are really <a>, <e>, <i>, and <o>, often <y> and <u>, and sometimes <w>. Though this description is different from and less simple than the current definition, it more accurately reflects the way things have been, and are, in our alphabet, and it makes things like the VCCV-VCV contrast and the twinning rule more reliable. For instance, getting back to the questions raised at the outset of this paper, there is twinning in *quitter* because the <u> is there a consonant not a vowel, so the requirement of a single vowel letter preceding a final single consonant letter is satisfied. There is also twinning in similar words with <qu>, such as *quizzing, squatter, squibbed,* and in longer words like *acquittal* and *equipped*. On the other hand, there is no twinning in *fewer* because the <w> is there a vowel, not a consonant. There is no twinning when adding suffixes to any word ending with the digraphs <aw> or <ew> or <ow>:

raw	rawest
claw	clawed
draw	drawing
brew	brewer
mew	mewed
new	newest
wow	wowed
mow	mower
glow	glowing

The definition of our vowels presented here—<a>, <e>, <i>, and <o> always; <u> and <y> usually; <w> sometimes—is not only more true to the history and function of our alphabet; it also makes our twinning rule, and more generally, the VCCV-VCV distinction, more reliable for our students, as both spellers and readers.