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| A - alpha | N - november |
| B - bravo | O - oscar |
| C - charlie | P - papa |
| D - delta | Q - quebec |
| E - echo | R - romeo |
| F - foxtrot | S - sierra |
| G - golf | T - tango |
| H - hotel | U - uniform |
| I - india | V - victor |
| J - juliet | W - whiskey |
| K - kilo | X - xray |
| L - lima | Y - yankee |
| M - mike | Z - zulu |

The NATO Phonetic alphabet is an internationally recognised system which enables the military, emergency services and the aviation industry to avoid miscommunicating similar-sounding letters over telephones and radios. Try saying the letters ‘M’ and ‘N’ out loud – or ‘D’ and ‘E’ – they sound very similar and can be easily confused.

The phonetic alphabet is not actually phonetic – it is really a spelling alphabet where a code word has been assigned to each letter of the English alphabet. This allows people to say letter and number combinations clearly over the telephone or radio even if the communication channel is poor. This is vital when providing location coordinates, aircraft details or clarifying names of people or places – especially when the people communicating have language differences.

The earliest forms of the alphabet were created in 1927. However, in 1948, the International Civil Aviation Organisation worked with Jean-Paul Vinay, a professor of linguistics, to agree a system that could be used internationally. The criteria for words to be used in the alphabet consisted of 3 parts:

1. A word could only be considered if it existed in a similar spelling in English, French and Spanish.
2. It had to be easy to pronounce, read and be recognisable by radio.
3. The word must not have any negative meaning or association.

The alphabet as we know it today was finally approved in 1956. It is so successful that it has now been adopted by many other organisations such as retail, banks and IT sectors to help them be accurate when talking with customers over the phone.

Phonetic Challenge

1. Spell your name using the Phonetic Alphabet.
2. Say your name to your study partner in the Phonetic Alphabet.
3. Tell your study partner or parent your school or home postcode using the Phonetic Alphabet.
4. Think of 3 different occasions when you might need to use the Phonetic Alphabet.