

ENGLISH SPELLING IS “TRUELY DIFICULT”

WHAT MAKES ENGLISH SPELLING HARD?

The Latin Alphabet Didn't Suit the English Language

- English was spoken long before it was written. The Latin alphabet had fewer letters than English had sounds.

Sounds Can Be Spelled in More Than One Way

- **Consonants.** English has 21 consonants, 24 consonant sounds, and some 115 different spellings for those sounds. The following words show some ways the hard **g** sound is spelled: *get, egg, ghost, guide, rogue, mortgage.*
- **Vowels.** English has six letters which can represent vowels (**a, e, i, o, u,** and sometimes **y**). There are 15 vowel sounds and more than 107 ways to spell those sounds. The following words show some ways the **ō** sound is spelled: *no, sew, rode, grow, loan, toe, oh, brooch, soul, though, beau, faux pas, yeoman, depot.*
- **Schwa sound** (“uh”). This most common sound in the English language may be spelled with almost any vowel or digraph in an unaccented syllable. Some examples include: *around, different, charity, contain, minimum, porpoise, pageant, certain, biscuit, Brooklyn.*

Letters Can Represent More Than One Sound

- **Consonants.** The letters **ch**, for example, are used to spell *church, charade,* and *ache.*
- **Vowels.** The letters **ea**, for example, are used in *break, pear, heart, threat, bead* and *earth.*
- **Combinations** such as **ough** confuse spellers. Consider the pronunciations of this combination in the following silly sentence: *He went through a rough day with a cough and a hiccough, though.*
- **Silent letters** plague spellers. In many cases, these were once pronounced, but spellings were never updated. For example: *thumb, indict, gnaw, honor, knife, salmon, hymn, island, listen, answer.* And of course, there are silent vowels: *bread, give, height, business, people, guide.*

Most “Rules” for Spelling Have Many Exceptions

- Although some rules are helpful, memorizing a large number of rules with their exceptions is probably more difficult than simply memorizing spellings. One rule that often holds is “**i** before **e** except after **c** or when sounded like **a** as in **neighbor** and **weigh**.” Yet consider some of the exceptions: *either, leisure, seize, weird.*

English spelling is consistent in inconsistency.

—Thomas R. Lounsbury
c. 1900

I take it you already know
Of **tough** and **bough** and **cough** and
dough?
Others may stumble, but not you
On **hiccough**, **thorough**, **slough** and
through.
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps,
To learn of less familiar traps?

Beware of **heard**, a dreadful word
That looks like **beard** and sounds like
bird.

And **dead**, it's said like **bed**, not **bead**:
For goodness sake, don't call it **deed**!
Watch out for **meat** and **great** and **threat**,
(They rhyme with **suite** and **straight** and
debt.)

A **moth** is not a moth in **mother**.
Nor **both** in **bother**, **broth** in **brother**.

And **here** is not a match for **there**,
And **dear** and **fear** for **bear** and **pear**,
And then there's **dose** and **rose** and
lose,
Just look them up, and **goose** and
choose,
And **cork** and **work** and **card** and **ward**,
And **font** and **front** and **word** and **sword**.
And **do** and **go**, then **thwart** and **cart**.
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!

A dreadful language? Why, man alive!
I'd learned to talk it when I was five.
And yet, to spell it, the more I've tried,
I hadn't learned at fifty-five.

—T. S. Watt
The Manchester Guardian
June 21, 1954

SPELLING LIST 28

Name _____

Date _____

1. *sea*

2. *season*

3. *reason*

4. *lead*

5. *leader*

6. *clean*

7. *team*

8. *mean*

9. *meant*

10. *read*

11. *ready*

12. *case*

13. *care*

14. *scare*

15. *animal*

16. _____

17. _____

18. _____

19. _____

20. _____

21. _____

22. _____

23. _____

24. _____

List 28

Level D, List 3

Words in Patterns:

- Words with **ea** as in **team**, Word Bank p. 144.
- Words with **-ase** as in **case**, Word Bank p. 143.
- Words with **-are** as in **care**, Word Bank p. 148.

Homophones:

- **sea** / **see** Teach if there is evidence of confusion.

Notes to the Teacher:

- **-ea** may spell either the short or long e sound. Rarely, it spells long **a** as in **great**. Many words using **ea** for the short sound are on List 39. **Meant** and **ready** are on this list because of the link to **mean** and **read**.
- **Season** and **reason** should be linked. **Caution:** Some students may generalize and write **beacause**. Although **because** need not be *mastered* until List 41, it is frequently used and may be taught as early as List 24. Have it on a wall chart or teach it as a personal word.
- **Lead** and **read** may be pronounced with either a short e or long e sound.
- **Meant** and **ready** are frequently misspelled **ment** and **reddy**, spellings more sensible, perhaps, than the correct ones. Have children say **mean - t** and link **read** and **ready**. Use both words frequently in dictation.
- A more common spelling for words rhyming with **case** is with **-ace** as in **face**.
- The sound for **-are** in **care** may be spelled as in **pear**, **pare** or **pair**. This causes many homophones. The most common spelling is **-are**. Memorization is necessary.

ä

Other:

add
after
badge
branch
cabin
calf
gasp
graph
half
lamb
laugh
laughter
plaid
plaque
rabbit
ranch
scalp
shall
shallow
wagon

–ab

blab
cab
crab
dab
drab
flab
gab
grab
jab
lab
nab
scab
slab
stab
tab

–ad

ad
bad
Brad
Chad
clad
dad
fad
glad
had
lad
mad
pad
sad
scad
Tad

–aft

craft
daft
draft
raft
shaft
Taft

–ag

bag
brag
crag
drag
flag
gag
lag
nag
rag
sag
shag
snag
stag
tag
wag

–al

Al
gal
Hal
pal
Val

–ap

cap
chap
clap
flap
gap
lap
map
nap
rap
sap
scrap
slap
snap
strap
tap
trap
wrap
yap

–am

am
clam
cram
dam
ham
jam
Pam
ram
Sam
sham
scram
slam
swam
Tam
yam

–amp

camp
champ
clamp
cramp
damp
gramp
lamp
ramp
scamp
stamp
tramp

–atch

batch
catch
hatch
latch
match
patch
scratch
snatch

–an

an
ban
bran
can
clan
Dan
fan
Fran
Jan
man
Nan
pan
plan
ran
scan
span
Stan
tan
than
van

–and

and
band
bland
brand
grand
hand
land
sand
stand
strand

–ant

ant
chant
grant
pant
plant
rant
scant
slant

–at

at
bat
brat
cat
chat
fat
flat
hat
mat
Nat
pat
Pat
rat
sat
scat
slat
that
vat

–ath

bath
math
path

–act

act
fact
tact

–ance

dance
chance
glance
prance
stance
trance

–ax

ax
lax
Max
tax

–as

(Generally spelled –ass as in pass.)
as
gas
has

–ash

bash
brash
cash
clash
crash
dash
flash
gash
hash
lash
mash
rash
sash
slash
smash
stash
trash
thrash

–ask

ask
bask
cask
flask
mask
task

–ast

blast
cast
fast
last
mast
past
vast

–ack

back
black
clack
crack
hack
Jack
knack
lack
Mack
pack
quack
rack
sack
shack
slack
smack
snack
stack
tack
track
whack

–ass

bass
brass
class
glass
grass
lass
mass
pass

–aff

chaff
staff

–asp

clasp
gasp
hasp
rasp

Why Can't My Child Spell?

Any child who finds spelling easy and spells well in writing has been blessed with a talent that few children possess. The best spellers have excellent visual memory. As one student put it, they “snap a picture of the word” with their minds, and refer to that mental image as they write or proofread.

If spelling is difficult for your child, he/she is not alone! Even brilliant people may have trouble with spelling. Spelling ability is more of a talent than an indication of intelligence. President Andrew Jackson once blurted out in frustration: “It’s a poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word!”

Our system of spelling is extremely complex and inconsistent. Sounds can be spelled in several ways, letters can represent several sounds, and most spelling “rules” have many exceptions! It’s no wonder children have difficulty learning to spell.

The roots of the problem are fascinating, and lie deep in the history of the English language. Here are a few highlights:

- English speakers throughout history have freely borrowed words from dozens of languages. To show the origin of these words, English kept the original spellings. All words with **ph**, for example, are from Greek.
- English was spoken long before it was written. The Latin alphabet, which was adopted for writing English, didn’t fit. It had fewer letters than English had sounds.
- Originally, words were spelled the way they were pronounced.

Because of the dozens of dialects in England, there were dozens of pronunciations, and so dozens of acceptable spellings for most words.

- In Shakespeare’s day, creative spelling was considered a mark of genius. More than 80 spellings of his name have been found!
- The first printers spelled words in various ways in order to justify their lines of type. Silent **e**’s were added or deleted, and consonants were doubled or not depending on printer preference and spacing.
- Pronunciation has changed drastically over the centuries, while spelling has stayed the same. 400 years ago, the now silent letters in **write**, **knife** and **comb** were pronounced. The **gh** in **light** had a guttural sound no longer used in English. **Name** had two syllables. **Bird** sounded like **beard**, and **daughter** rhymed with **laughter**!
- Samuel Johnson compiled the first English dictionary in 1755. In order to alphabetize words, he had to choose a preferred spelling. He was not

consistent in all cases (*downhil* – *uphill*), but his dictionary was accepted as the final authority on spelling for some 100 years. Noah Webster reformed some spellings in his American dictionary, but public outcry and reverence for tradition prevented him from making too many changes.

“The present bad spelling is only bad, because contrary to the present bad rules; under new rules it would be good. The difficulty of learning to spell well in the old way is so great, that few attain it, thousands and thousands writing on to old age without ever being able to acquire it.”

— Benjamin Franklin

Many historical figures have advocated spelling reform. Benjamin Franklin even developed a whole new alphabet, with as many letters as English has sounds! But spelling was not reformed, despite the effort and financial support of eminent people such as Benjamin Franklin, Noah Webster, Andrew Carnegie, Theodore Roosevelt and George Bernard Shaw. So we’re stuck with an illogical and complicated system of spelling that frustrates adults as well as students.

Learning to spell correctly is not easy for most, but it is important for all, especially with increased competition for good jobs. Even general readers make judgments about a person’s intelligence and level of education based on spelling. Poor spelling on a resume can offend an employer and cost an otherwise qualified candidate a job!

The idea that spelling is an indicator of intelligence and a good education comes from the British class system. Historically in England, only the children of the well-to-do could afford to go to school and learn to write and spell. People who couldn’t spell were considered lower class and uneducated. Upper class children with little talent for spelling were publicly shamed for their mistakes, so they were *powerfully* motivated to study! Spelling bees are a holdover of these old traditions.

Children have the best chance of learning to spell well if parents and teachers share common, reasonable expectations and goals. A child needs every possible ally in the difficult task of learning to spell in English.

Our Queer Language

*When the English tongue we speak
Why is **break** not rhymed with **freak**?
Will you tell me why it’s true
We say **sew** but likewise **few**?
And the maker of a verse
Cannot cap his **horse** with **worse**.
Beard sounds not the same as **heard**;
Cord is different from **word**.
Cow is **cow** but low is **low**,
Shoe is never rhymed with **foe**.
Think of **hose** and **dose** and **lose**,
And think of **goose** and not of **choose**.
Think of **comb** and **tomb** and **bomb**,
Doll and **roll**, **home** and **some**.
And since **pay** is rhymed with **say**,
Why not **paid** with **said**, I pray?
We have **blood** and **food** and **good**;
Mould is not pronounced like **could**.
Wherefore **done** but **gone** and **lone**?
Is there any reason known?
And, in short, it seems to me
Sounds and letters disagree.*

Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer
Spectator, Aug. 9, 1902

What Is a Successful Speller?

Given that not everyone has the talent to become an excellent speller, and that spelling is important in our society, what does it take to become an adequate and successful speller?

Successful spellers:

- **Accept personal responsibility for correct spelling in their own writing.** Children must know that spelling is important and care about getting it right.
- **Master the most common and useful words and rules.** Amazingly, 90% of text in English consists of only 1000 base words, and a large percentage of common misspellings are of relatively few words.
- **Use an adequate and systematic method for memorizing new spellings.**
- **Independently use the dictionary and other memory aids.**
- **Recognize regular and irregular spellings.**
- **Understand how words are constructed (roots, prefixes and suffixes).**

How Can Parents Help with Spelling?

- **Do** make sure your child does homework and practices spelling each night. Provide a special, quiet place, with enough light, a good chair, a desk or table, and a clock. Have materials such as paper, pencils and reference books gathered and kept together in a desk, drawer or box.
- **Do** set aside a special time to do homework, with the TV and radio off. Make homework a priority in the family.
- **Do** get your child a dictionary appropriate for his age level. Teach and reteach him how to look up words. Pay attention and encourage him whenever he uses it without assistance.
- **Don't** always refer children to the dictionary for spellings or they could see it as a hated chore.
- **Do** place as much responsibility as possible on the child when you're asked for a spelling. Have him list some possible spellings and you confirm which is correct. Or have him suggest letters and you fill in the letters not known.
- **Do** proofread your child's final draft papers after he has edited them to make sure that all mistakes were caught. Rather than point out specific mistakes, first indicate that there is a mistake on a

line, and challenge the child to find it and fix it.

- **Do** consider keeping a record of words your child misspells in his/her writing, perhaps a 3x5 card file with a card for each word in alphabetical order, or a personal dictionary with a page for words beginning with each letter. The child can use this rather than the big dictionary for words already looked up once. You can spend a few minutes each day helping your child review and practice some of these words. Whenever they are spelled correctly in writing, **celebrate!**

Regardless of your child's spelling talent, he/she *can* become a successful speller. Maintain high standards, focus on the positive, celebrate every success, and be very patient!

*Susan C. Anthony is an award-winning author and classroom teacher. Her book, **Spelling Plus: 1000 Words toward Spelling Success**, is available from Instructional Resources, Box 111704, Anchorage, AK 99511 907-345-6689*

Do's and Don'ts for Concerned Parents

- **Don't** equate spelling ability with intelligence, quality of education, or personal worth. If your child isn't talented in spelling, learn what his/her talents are and foster them.
- **Do** emphasize the value and importance of correct spelling without losing perspective. Spelling is to writing as appearance is to character. Good appearance counts, as does good spelling. But a person's *ideas, values* and *character* are far more important.
- **Do** hold up high standards while acknowledging the difficulty of the child's task. Have confidence in his/her ability to learn. Encourage, be patient and consistent. Reward progress without expecting perfection.
- **Don't** expect good spelling in first draft writing, or point out spelling errors in a child's writing before you have read and responded to the message. It is difficult if not impossible for children to concentrate on spelling at the same time as they concentrate on the ideas they are trying to express in writing. Eventually, most common spellings should be *mastered* so that they require little or no conscious thought and *are* correct in first drafts.
- **Do** expect good spelling in final draft writing, and expect children to copy spellings accurately.
- **Don't** expect a child to remember a spelling word just because it's been studied on a list and spelled right on a weekly test. An *incredible* amount of review and practice may be needed for mastery.
- **Don't** blame teachers for a child's problems with spelling or expect spelling to be learned *only* at school. Cooperation between teachers and parents is crucial.

Spelling Homework Procedure

1. **Read the word aloud from the spelling list.**
2. **Spell the word aloud as you point to each letter, then read it.**
3. **Write the word on your own paper as you spell and read it.**
4. **Check the model. Point to each letter.**
5. **Check and correct the word you wrote. Point to each letter.**
6. **Cover the first word you wrote. Repeat steps 3–5 two more times.**
7. **Close your eyes. Spell the word aloud and say it.**

The final result is a paper with each word written perfectly three times. If all steps were done correctly, the learner has practiced each word 11 times in 50–60 seconds. Only three of the practices were written.
