

Spelling Made Easy

How do you spell that?

For many of us this is a familiar request. It can be heard day and night in households and classrooms around the country, as young children attempt to write words that they do not as yet know how to spell. These children need our patience and support. Sometimes it is appropriate to spell the word for them and other times we can take the opportunity to give hints or clues about how to spell the target word. Our ultimate aim however is to equip young writers with spelling strategies, thus empowering them to unlock the spelling of words for themselves.

But English can be such a frustrating language.

A language of thousands of words, English has over the years adapted words from old English times and as well has adopted, as its own, many words from other languages including French, Greek and Latin. However 80% of English spelling is regular. This regularity occurs in three main domains.

1. The first is the direct relationship between single letters and the sounds they represent (**the alphabetic principle**) - consonants and short vowels, digraphs such as sh, th and ch. This knowledge helps us to spell phonically regular words such as *cat, strip, handstand, chips*.
2. the second is in the spelling patterns or **rimes** (-est, -ight, -ill, -ame etc)
3. third is in the **morphology** - the additions and endings which alter the meanings of words (-ed, able, ment, ly, dis). This knowledge helps us to read and spell words such as *appear, appeared, appearing, disappear, disappearance*.

Let's focus on what is regular in English

When teaching and guiding young students we must address all three areas of English language regularity. This can be done even from an early age.

1. Young children need to know the links between the sounds of English and the letters. They can have fun as they are taught to listen and think about the sounds they hear in words (**phonological awareness**). Parents and teachers can reinforce and consolidate this early awareness of sounds to teach the link by using a multi-sensory teaching approach such as is used in the **Singing Alphabet** and the **Oxford Essential Reading** series.
2. Young children notice words in their environment. Again this is an opportunity to show them the regularities in the second area. For example *school crossing* - the *ing* and *oo*/rimes are very frequent and consistent rime patterns in English and therefore can be used to improve spelling accuracy and confidence. Brainstorm other words with the same sound pattern and create new word plays or fun

sentences - ool - *Don't be a fool, be cool in school.* Listen for examples of the sound pattern. Look at the letter patterns in these words. Think of other words that may be spelled the same way.

Alternatively have fun with an auditory rhyme brainstorm, for example, based on the word **bear** to generate a word list. Then look at the letter patterns and see the number of examples in each rime group. For example - **hare, stair, air, care, bear, wear, dare, pair, stare, mare, bare, lair, tear** and **hair**. This will show the three main rime families for this auditory rhyme -

hare, bare, stare, care, dare, mare;

air, lair, hair, stair, pair;

bear, wear, tear.

For more information look at our newsletter article **No:9 Let's talk about rhyme, rime and analogy**. In this we addressed the issue of **rime** - those members of the same word family that both sound and look the same e.g. lame, came, same, blame, fame, tame.

3. An easy way to demonstrate the power of word additions to build new words is to demonstrate word building from a single word such as the word *love* - *loves, loved, loving, lovable, unlovable*. Write these words and encourage the students to think about how the spelling changed and why. Many simple games can also be created for student pairs as they score points for creating new words from base words or throw a dice and think of three words that come from the base word - *happy*. Word Building is also one of the task cards used in the Love and Reilly game **Word Journey**.

Another enjoyable activity is the creation of words, both real and nonsense, from cards which feature **prefixes** (re, un, mis, bi, im, in, sub, pre) **core words** (plan, port, cope, force, shape, stand) and **suffixes** and other endings (ment, able, ful, ance, ness, ive, ly). Children enjoy physically manipulating the cards to create longer words such as *unstoppable, irreplaceable, reportable*. They will also enjoy making nonsense words such as *unshapeable, recopement, reportness*.

Let's be fair

Two important ingredients in any successful spelling program will be student interest and student involvement in thinking about words. We need to create a solid foundation for students and not allow them to be overwhelmed by irregularities in spelling. Once they have mastered something in the first two areas, for example the **rime** *-ain*, this can be used to support awareness of the morphological area. In this way our teaching helps

young children to learn words that will help them unlock other words. For example: **rain** - rains, rainy, rained, raining, raincoat.

Children will learn if we create a sense of fun and enjoyment as well as give them the time and support to achieve a sense of mastery. So lets reinforce a positive approach - 'What I **do** know rather than what I don't know.'

Will wall charts help?

Spelling charts adorn the walls of most classrooms. These may feature spelling rules, vowel patterns such as *ea*, *ar* or sometimes list interesting or themed words. Perhaps we need to ask, who are these charts for and who is looking at them? Unfortunately many students tend to see these charts only as part of the painted backdrop of the classroom and not as something that they "own" or use.

Whilst spelling wall charts can be particularly useful there are also a number of problems and pitfalls with their use.

- Often the 'rule' is not clearly stated. In fact a particular rule may not be very useful in practical terms because it has too many exceptions. That is, a rule that is only true 30% of the time may be too confusing for many young learners. Let's teach the 95% - 100% rules before the 'rules' with all the exceptions! See Adams (1990) pages 256-272.
- The spelling list may focus solely on visual letter patterns e.g. all words containing *ea* - (head, fleas, ear, lead) whether or not the words show the consistent link between sound and letter patterns as in the following rime - *lead*, *bead*, *read*.
- Students do not know how to use the lists. They are unable to put into their own words why the words go together and therefore are not likely to be able to use the chart to help when writing.
- The chart does not build knowledge of English regularity at one of the levels stated previously.

Students should be actively involved in the gradual creation of wall charts as the class builds their knowledge e.g. *ee* in the *eep*, *een* and *eet* rime patterns. They should be encouraged to see and hear the letter and sound patterns, discover new patterns and be rewarded for thinking of further examples.

Can spelling be half right or half wrong?

Once past the initial stages of spelling development, very few spelling attempts are completely wrong. Learning to spell correctly is a long term process and we must be prepared to reinforce effort and all early attempts. Spelling ability is very sensitive to the student's sound awareness skills - how well they can detect, store, and retrieve the

sounds within words. Spelling attempts, even if incorrect, give the teacher a clearer insight into the levels of phonological awareness and orthographic knowledge currently being employed. Errors and successes give us an indication of what areas of knowledge may need to be targeted and practiced.

We need to help the student identify which parts are correct and which need more thinking. We may ask the child why they spelled the word a particular way. Their attempt may be wrong but still reflect a thinking approach to spelling new words (Do you have a new *pare* of glasses?)

We may offer suggestions such as "Do you have a vowel in every syllable?" At all times we must try to give positive reinforcement, for example: "Well done, that was a long word and you have the right number of syllables."

Are flash cards out of fashion?

Students do need to develop and store a visual image or template of words. This is essential for the instant recognition of the words in fluent reading and also helps with self checking of spelling attempts. Flash cards are useful for building confidence with rapid and automatic word recognition particularly for irregular words such as *said*, *was*. However, some children develop an over reliance on the visual pattern of words and do not link the visual template of the word with the auditory pattern and the word meaning. They try to learn the word visually off by heart often with initial success. However when teachers present the spelling test words out of order or expect students to retain the words over time or use them correctly in another context, this approach leaves children with very little support to recall the spelling.

- Make sure the pronunciation of spelling words is clear and children have the opportunity to hear and say the words a number of times prior to and during writing.
- Some tricky words can be made easier by helping children personalize their knowledge. They may need a familiar example or trigger - mum's name Clare.

Some general principles

- Teach the regular and consistent patterns first as many students can be easily overwhelmed by the irregularities and one off spelling examples.
- The teacher should demonstrate a problem solving approach to spelling and show how to make sense of spelling. This involves developing the students' meta-linguistic abilities. Encourage the students to think and talk aloud about spelling - the sound and letter patterns, rules, word families and meanings. Encourage "word detectives" in the classroom. Is this word "fair"? (That is, does it have one of the three forms of English regularity? If not, why not, and how will we remember the tricky parts?)
- Encourage students to verbalize their knowledge. One fun activity is to get students involved in **word sorts** - sorting different flashcards according to

certain criteria and explaining why. For example "I put all these cards together because all start with the same first sound; or they belong to the *ain* rime family; or they all have *ed* (*past tense ending*); or they are built from the same root word - *create, creation, creates, creating, creative.*" We cannot expect to systematically teach every word that a student will need in their school life; however a student with this kind of knowledge about words is able to be a strategic and independent learner of new words.

- Manipulation of letters or parts of words is also a very powerful tool to show students about letter sequences and word structure. You can use foam or magnetic letters (Smart Kids) or if these are not available use cards with parts of the word written on them. Make it fun and set challenging but realistic goals. Here is an example. "How many words can you make from the letters m,b,s,a,t,i,e,p?" Through manipulation students will learn that the letters *s-t-o-p* can be rearranged to also spell *pots, post* and *spot* but not *opst*.
- Use first hand understanding of words from everyday language to facilitate the written spelling form. For example talk about the weather - *sunny, windy, chilly, cloudy* - identifying the "EE" sound and show how this is represented by the letter "Y". Another example might be in a science class to relate new terminology to words that are already familiar. For example, *telephone* and *television* can be used to introduce *telescope*.
- Have fun with words! If you enjoy spelling it is likely your students will also. Spelling may take time to master but there can be a lot of fun and creativity along the way.

References and resources:

Word Journey, Singing Alphabet, A Box of Rimes - Short Vowels/Long Vowels - Love and Reilly Speech & Language Products. 64 Rowell Ave Camberwell. Victoria. Ph: 03 98897498

Oxford Essential Reading. Oxford University Press. Melbourne. Ph: 1300650616

Magnetic and Foam letters and other resources - Smart Kids P.O.Box 829 Artarmon NSW. Ph: 02 94154080

Beginning To Read - Thinking and Learning about Print. Adams, M. J. 1990 MIT Press