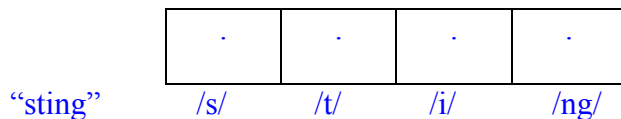


## **Spelling Instruction: Key Content and Strategies for Kindergarten through Seventh Grade**

[The article below is excerpted from Moats, L. C. (Winter 2005/06). How spelling supports reading: And why it is more regular and predictable than you think. *American Educator*, 12-22, 42-43.

**Kindergarten: Phoneme awareness, letter sounds, and letter names.** Phoneme awareness training helps children in the early stages of learning to spell (Tangel & Blachman, 1995; Uhry & Shepherd, 1993) and helps remediate the problems of poor spellers at any age (Carreker, 2005). A typical activity for developing this skill is direct teaching of all consonant and vowel sounds (which, as you recall from the main article, is different from teaching the letters) (Lindamood & Lindamood, 1998; Moats & Rosow, 2002). Other activities include identifying speech sounds (What sound do *you* and *unicorn* start with?), finding examples of words with a given phoneme (Which word ends with /t/, *hummed* or *pitched*?), or reversing the sequence of sounds in a word such as *safe* (face). In a “sound workout,” children may strengthen their phonemic awareness by placing a chip into a box for each speech sound in a word, saying each sound as the chip is moved, or stretching out a finger for each sound that is articulated.



As they are learning the letter sounds, children also need to learn the letter names. Fluency with letter names and forms in kindergarten facilitates spelling and is an indicator that children are likely to develop oral reading fluency. Letters should be taught directly and systematically. Older poor spellers should be asked to write the alphabet in order, accurately, and quickly. (Allen [2005] describes multi-sensory techniques and activities in detail for students in the primary grades.)

**1<sup>st</sup> grade: Anglo-Saxon regular consonant and vowel phoneme-grapheme correspondences.**

Spelling by explicit phoneme-grapheme mapping (Berninger et al., 1998; Ehri, 1998; Grace, 2006; Moats, 2004) requires the learner to match the letters/letter combinations in a word to the speech sounds they represent. One approach is to use a simple grid; each box of the grid represents a phoneme. As these examples show, the teacher selects a word and gives children an empty grid with a box for each phoneme. The teacher says the word, then the students repeat it, segment the sounds, and write a grapheme in each box.

Straight: In this example, the long a (/ā/) is spelled with the 4-letter grapheme, aigh.

s	t	r	aigh	t
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Crash: In this example, the cr combination stands for two phonemes; the sh is a digraph (meaning it represents one phoneme).

c	r	a	sh
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Because it helps fix phoneme-grapheme correspondences in children's minds, this technique supports children's spelling, reading, and writing development. It should be taught in first grade, but it is also especially helpful with second and third grade students who missed the fundamentals in the earlier grades.

**1-3: Irregular Anglo-Saxon words.** Because they are often very old words from Anglo-Saxon whose pronunciation—but not spelling—has changed, high frequency words are more often irregular than lower frequency words with a Latin or other romance-language base. Although instruction in irregular words needs to start early so that children don't memorize the wrong spelling, it should not supersede instruction in the common phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Irregular words are learned most easily by students who already know common phoneme-grapheme correspondences and who can explicitly analyze the speech to print mapping system. This is because irregular words have some regular correspondences, and also because a good

speller makes mental comparisons between what a spelling ought to be and what it is. Awareness of phoneme-grapheme correspondences, regular and irregular, is the “glue that holds the word in memory” (Ehri, 2004, p. 155).

Some suggested methods for teaching irregular words include: a) grouping words with some memorable similarity (*two, twice, twenty, twilight, twin; one, only, once; their, heir; where, here, there*); b) calling attention to the odd part of the word that must be learned by heart (*friend; does*); c) using a multi-sensory memory strategy (Carreker, 2005) that gives the students many ways to repeatedly practice spelling the word (such as copying the word while saying the letters, discussing what is odd about the word, and covering the word and then spelling it aloud); d) using mnemonics (*there is a rat in separate; the principal is my pal*); and e) asking the learner to pay very close attention to the letter sequence by visualizing it and recalling it backwards as well as forwards.

I suggest introducing irregular words at the rate of about three to five per week, beginning with words the children write most often (Moats, 2003) and also tend to misspell. If a child learns a basic high frequency word the wrong way, unlearning it once a habit has been formed is more difficult than learning it the right way the first time. Spellings for words such as *they, went, who, and said* should not be “invented” or they will be misspelled *ad infinitum*. If students are very poor spellers, concentrate instruction on words they are most likely to write (Graham, Harris, & Loynachan, 1994).

**2: More complex Anglo-Saxon spelling (spelling according to the position of a sound in a word, letter patterns/conventions, and most common inflectional endings).** Guided discovery with word sorting and teacher questioning is a powerful approach for helping students understand spellings that depend on the position of a sound in a word (Bear, Invernizzi,

Templeton, & Johnston, 2000) or established conventions (like –ve). For example, the –ge and –dge pattern for the phoneme /j/ lends itself to word sorting and guided discovery. Instead of telling students the pattern (i.e., when a single syllable word ends in /j/, spell it –dge right after a short vowel, and –ge right after a long vowel or other consonant), ask them to sort a list of words by the spellings for /j/ and help them figure out what is going on. Once they see the pattern, they should be ready to learn the rule.

Inflections (-ed, -s, -es, -ing, -er, -est, which are also called grammatical suffixes) are morphemes that change the number, person, or tense of the word to which they are added, but they do not change its part of speech. The spelling errors in intermediate students' writings frequently concern inflections, especially –ed and plural –s and –es (Apel et al., 2004; Bryant et al., 1997; Moats, 1996). Although inflections are emphasized (and should be mastered) in third grade, they should be introduced in first grade and practiced for several years thereafter. I'll use the suffix –ed to explain one teaching strategy. Begin by making students aware of the sounds the -ed suffix makes: /d/ as in banged; /t/ as in snacked; and /id/ as in lifted. Next, sort words according to the sound of the past tense ending and explain that only one of the endings (the –ed on lifted) makes a new syllable. The –ed spelling looks as if it spells a whole syllable, but most of the time it does not; thus, those endings are easy to ignore or to misspell. Then, the rules for adding endings must be tackled. There are three major rules in English for adding suffixes to base words: the doubling rule (hopped), the drop-e rule (hoped), and the change y to i rule (studied). These rules should be introduced one at a time, beginning in second grade, and practiced for several years until they are internalized. To teach them, start by decomposing familiar words with inflections by taking off the ending and finding the base word: hoping =

hope + ing; studious = study + ous; committed = commit + ed. Then start combining base words and endings.

**3: Multisyllable words, including Anglo-Saxon syllabication, compounds, schwa, and most common prefixes and suffixes.** Although children should begin practicing breaking words into syllables in first grade, by third grade they should be ready to master syllabication. Children's spelling should be greatly improved if they learn the six basic syllable types and how they affect spelling. For example, once children learn about the open, closed, and consonant-le syllable types, they can reliably predict when they should double consonants in words that end with a consonant-le syllable. Open syllables end with a long vowel sound that is spelled with a single vowel letter (as in *program*). Closed syllables have a short vowel and end with a consonant (as in *hostel*). Consonant-le syllables are unaccented, only appear at the end of words, and have a consonant, /l/ sound, and silent e. Here comes the key to doubling: When an open syllable is combined with a consonant-le syllable—as in *cable*, *bugle*, and *title*—there is no doubled consonant. In contrast, when a closed syllable is combined with a consonant-le syllable—as in *dabble*, *topple*, and *little*—a double consonant results.

To teach how to spell multisyllable words, consider beginning with compounds (catfish, hotdog, playground, and yellowtail). Compounds offer two big advantages: Children more easily detect their syllables, and the spelling of each base word stays the same.

Multisyllable words bring up the unavoidable problem of schwa (/ə/), the unaccented vowel sound that has been emptied of its identity and can be described as a lazy vowel. Teach children that some vowel sounds have the stuffing taken out of them when they are unaccented. After students spell a word such as *prob-lem*, *a-dept*, or *com-mit*, they can say the word naturally and mark the syllable that has a schwa. Instruction about schwa helps students understand why

some words do not sound the way they are spelled—and reminds teachers not to rely exclusively on “spell it by sounding it out” because that strategy is limited with multi-syllable words.

Having already learned the common inflectional endings, students should be ready to move on to other common Anglo-Saxon and Latin suffixes (such as –en, -ly, -y, -ful, -less, and –ness) as well as the most common Anglo-Saxon and Latin prefixes (such as pre-, sub-, re-, mis-, and un-). Children need to learn to recognize these prefixes and suffixes as stable and meaningful word parts and they should begin learning their meanings.

**4: Latin-based prefixes, suffixes, and roots.** Direct teaching about the meaningful parts of words begins with the most common inflections, but then extends to prefixes, suffixes, and roots of Latin origin (Henry, 2003). Prefixes and suffixes have stable spellings and meanings.

Suffixes such as *-ly*, *-al*, *-ment*, *-less*, *-ness*, *-ful*, *-ous* also signify the part of speech of the word to which they are added. Roots such as *nat* (to be born) can be studied through families of words, such as *native*, *nation*, *national*, *multinational*, *international*, *nationalistic*, etc. This is especially helpful in the intermediate and middle grades to help students develop a larger vocabulary. A sample lesson on the prefix *super-* and the prepositions *over* and *under* is in the box on p. ##.

Although the relationship between the meaningful parts of a word and the present-day meaning of a word range from transparent, as in *antebellum* (with *ante* meaning before and *bellum* meaning war), to obscure, as in *apartment* (with *a* meaning to or toward and *part* meaning to share or part), the stability of morpheme spellings assists with recall and recognition.

**5-6: More complex Latin-based forms.** Content words (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs) in academic text are commonly of Latin origin and composed of prefixes, roots, and/or suffixes. Their study is productive for reading comprehension, spelling, and vocabulary development (Carlisle and Stone, 2005). However, more complex words or word parts derived from Latin

often change either the pronunciation or spelling of the prefix and/or root. For example, collaborate is related to the root labor (to work). The prefix col is a changed form of com (with), designed to blend easily into the root. Many other “chameleon” prefixes operate this way. It’s best to organize word study around a common root once prefixes and suffixes are recognized (Henry, 2003; Templeton et al., 1992).

**6-7: Greek combining forms.** Since the Renaissance, scholars have drawn from the Greek language to name scientific concepts and discoveries. As a result, middle school (and older) students will encounter hundreds of words derived from Greek in math, science, and philosophy texts. Greek word parts work more like compounds than roots. They can be combined more flexibly, as follows: thermodynamics and isotherm; psychobiology and neuropsychology; telephone and phonogram. Their spellings are very consistent, and often use the correspondences ch for /k/, y for /i/ or /i/, and ph for /f/.

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