

Chapter 1

Redefining spelling

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IN THIS INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER, fragments from the spelling stories of children, teachers, parents and carers will be used to paint a broad picture of what spelling is and what it isn't. The following chapters provide more detailed guidance on how to work with children to build their spelling skills in productive ways.

Zoe is entering year 5, and getting very frustrated with herself for still not being able to spell well. I find that she is getting very depressed (even after day 1 of school term 1!) as she is comparing herself to her achieving friends.

There appears to be a lot of guilt and shame attached to being a poor speller. Many of my responses to the spelling queries I receive begin with 'It's not your fault'. And that seems as good a place as any to begin this book.

Spelling is a learned skill. Our brains are not ready wired for spelling; each individual brain must learn to spell. There are some skills for which the brain comes ready wired— speaking and listening, for example. Reading, writing and spelling, however, have to be learned. How each of us learns these skills will depend, to some extent, on the structure of the brain we were born with, and to a large extent the kind of input we receive.

Because we weren't all born with identical brains, we won't all respond to the same kind of input. So, unless we have some brain damage to specific parts of the brain that deal with language learning, we can all learn to read, write ... and spell. However, there will be differences in the way we learn these skills. We won't all learn from the same kind of teaching. By and large, problems with learning to spell are a function of the teaching rather than the learner.

Many approaches to spelling instruction reveal an underlying assumption that there is an innateness about a person's ability to spell. In fact, many of us think spelling ability is something that some of us just have and others don't. And this is a message that is easily passed on to our children, as this mother recounts:

I am the parent of two children (12-year-old girl and 13-year-old boy) who do well at everything in life except for spelling. They are deflated and constantly tell me: 'Mum, I am just not one of the kids that can spell.'

This kind of 'naturalistic' thinking about spelling is inaccurate and very unhelpful. It leaves struggling spellers with a poor self image that they may carry with them into other areas of their school work and even beyond their schooling years. It also encourages a fatalistic approach to spelling: 'Oh well, we can't be good at everything and spelling is just not your "thing".' As a result some teachers may not bother to investigate the effectiveness of their teaching methods because they perceive spelling to be an innate ability over which they have little influence. They may be less likely to consider the contribution of their own teaching to the issue if they perceive it to be an intractable 'problem' within the student.

The fact that we all learn differently is part of the joy of being human, but it can also make teaching others challenging. Another parent writes:

I home-school my children. This is my first year. My daughter is a natural speller. It just comes easily to her. As it has, for the most part, to me. My son, 7, however, really struggles. REALLY struggles. And so I've been struggling with how to help him.

Our default position is to teach in the way that we learned most easily and to assume that this will work for everyone. However, teaching everyone the same way doesn't produce the same learning results. Children need to be taught to spell in the way they need to learn, and that may be different from the way their parents or their teachers learned. In her plea, this mother has also repeated the commonly held belief that some people are

just ‘natural’ spellers. In fact, ‘natural’ spellers are simply receiving the kind of input they need for their brains to learn to spell.

Importantly, spelling ability is not a measure of intelligence, as both research and anecdotes confirm:

My son is 8.5 and has autism. He scores in the 95th percentile for comprehension and use of vocab, but in the 5th percentile for spelling. I need to find a way to help him. He's so bad not even the spell checker can sort him out.

You can have poor spelling skills while being an excellent reader or a creative writer or brilliant scientist. But nor is being a good speller some kind of dumb luck. It isn't simply a matter of having a ‘head’ for spelling, or possessing an excellent memory.

What is spelling?

If good spelling is simply a matter of good teaching, then it is important to clearly understand what ‘spelling’ is, in order to teach it.

A simple commonsense definition of spelling is getting the ‘right’ letters in the ‘right’ order when you write a word. If in doubt as to what the right letters are, and what the right order is, we can consult a dictionary.

However, words are not simply strings of letters. Words are combinations of letter patterns and meaningful parts. Let's look at an example.

BICYCLE BREAKDOWN

The word *bicycle* is not simply a string of seven letters. It has two distinctly meaningful parts: ‘bi’ meaning two (consider other bi words like bilingual, bifocal) and ‘cycle’ meaning circle or wheel. And we can see this meaning structure in the more colloquial name for a bicycle: the two-wheeler. Rather than one string of seven letters to learn, we now have two smaller, and meaning laden, parts to spell.

So how do we know which letters to use when we write those two parts of the word *bicycle*?

'Bi' is a Latin origin word, and it isn't too hard to remember these two letters, which are also fairly predictable letters for the sounds you hear when you say 'bi'. 'Cycle' throws up many more options. Why isn't it 'sikel', for example, as many young writers would probably write? The answer lies in the history of the word, in its original Greek origins *kyklo* – hence the 'y', and its entry into English through a French filter – hence the 'c's, including the initial 'c' making the 's' sound.

There is nothing natural and intuitive about spelling. The letters that represent the words we speak are the result of a complex history in which humans and their languages have interacted with one another over hundreds of years.

This makes spelling possibly one of the most 'unnatural' of skills we have to learn – which makes it all the more strange that many consider it a natural talent, or something you can simply pick up by taking a list of 10 words home to learn with Mum and Dad for the Friday test. The reasons our words are spelled the way they are have little to do with 'nature' and everything to do with history and society. Every word in English represents a story – a mini lesson in history, geography, linguistics, sociology and politics.

Those who struggle with spelling haven't been taught to look at words this way. They are stuck trying to remember the right order of a string of letters, and that is an impossible task. If words were just strings of letters then none of us could spell. We simply don't have the brain capacity to learn tens of thousands of strings of letters, and recall them every time we write a word. Most of us struggle to remember even one computer password of randomly generated letters. This is because we rely on patterns and meaning to learn anything new, and this is just as true for learning to spell words.

Sounding out?

Heather writes,

I'm now 28 and for years have been wondering how I could improve in spelling and I am rather self-conscious about it. I listen to sounds and spell what I hear.

As the 'bicycle' example illustrates, English spelling is not a simple exercise in matching sounds to letters, yet sounds-based approaches to teaching spelling predominate in schools.

English sounds and the letters in words have a one-to-one match only about 12 per cent of the time. We have 44 distinct sounds in English but only 26 letters, so letters have to do extra work to represent those additional sounds. Sometimes they do that work by joining together – for example, 's' and 'h' join to make the 'sh' sound in *shell*. Sometimes they do the work in less transparent ways – 't' and 'h' combine to make 'th'. But 'th' actually makes two of the 44 sounds in English – in *this*, and the breathier sound in *thistle*.

The 44 sounds of English can be represented by hundreds and hundreds of letter combinations. For example, the sound of 'oo' in *moon* can be made by 'o' in *do*, 'ew' in *blew*, 'ue' in *glue*, 'ough' in *through*, 'oux' in *choux* and 'oe' in *shoe*.

In fact there are more than 1200 possible letter combinations to represent those 44 sounds. Compare that to more phonically regular languages like German, a close linguistic relation to English, which also has 26 letters in its alphabet but only 34 distinct sounds, and 39 letter combinations to represent those sounds.

It's this huge variability in English that can cause many people to despair when it comes to spelling. How can we possibly get spelling right when there are so many letter options for the sounds we hear in words? Indeed, the odds of getting the right letters in the right order are very low if sounds are all you are relying on.

More than sounds

English has never been a phonetic language – right from the day 1500 years ago when it imported a foreign alphabet – Latin – as its chosen way to represent the spoken English word in print. Right from the beginning, the letters of the Latin alphabet were insufficient to represent the sounds of the

Old English language of the time, and compromises were made, with new letters introduced and old letters given new roles. With phonetic regularity a lost cause from the beginning, English never bothered pursuing it in the ensuing centuries of language borrowing and growth.

English is one of the most polyglot languages on the planet – it has taken words from many other languages. Sometimes those words have come from those who conquered the British Isles, for example, the Norse and then the French. Often those words have come into English as we have looked to the ancient languages of Latin and Greek to give names to new inventions and discoveries. In more recent centuries, new words have come from the languages of those the English conquered or traded with. English words are a reflection of social, geographical and political shifts throughout the history of those who speak English.

As we have imported these words into English, we have often kept the spelling from the original language and applied an English pronunciation to them. And of course there is no single English pronunciation. Ever since English was first spoken, there have been pronunciation differences. In the beginning the differences were from region to region in England, differences that are still clearly discernible today. Then the differences in pronunciation developed from colony to colony – consider, for example, the differences in the accents of the southern states of the United States, Australian English and South African English. Today the pronunciation of English words is incredibly diverse as there are now more non-native English-speakers than mother tongue speakers of English. The sounds of the English words we speak have become ever more distant from the spellings of those words.

All of this means that purely phonics-based – or sounds – approaches to spelling are doomed to failure.

A rich linguistic tapestry

Jean noticed her grand-daughter had a spelling problem and writes,

I used to help her with her spelling list and found that by sounding out the word it seemed to help, but only temporarily as her memory did not seem to be able to retain the correct spelling long term.

If all you have been given as a tool for learning to spell is to ‘sound it out’, then you have been made a phonological promise that English simply cannot keep. The majority of spelling errors made by poor spellers demonstrate an over-reliance on sounding out. Put simply, sounding out will ensure that you get the spelling of the word wrong, most of the time.

Rather than being a phonetic language, English is categorised as a morpho-phonemic language. This means that a combination of the sound, the history and the meaning of the word influences its spelling. An effective speller draws upon the entire rich linguistic tapestry of a word in order to spell it correctly. The threads of this tapestry can be identified as:

- phonology – the sounds of the word
- morphology – the meaningful parts of the word
- etymology – the history of the word, and
- orthography – the conventions of spelling that have developed over time.

These are interrelated threads. We saw that the spelling of *bicycle* is helped by looking at the morphology of the word: bi – cycle. We also saw that the spelling of ‘cycle’ is a combination of knowing the phonology of the word and how that is influenced by its etymology (its Greek and Latin roots).

When we understand spelling in this way, spelling is less of a hit-and-miss attempt at a seemingly random and chaotic system, and more an exciting treasure hunt in which each word contains clues to its history and meaning – and the system behind English spelling becomes more evident.

Teaching children to hunt for treasure

The exploration of word histories and meanings is not always evident in classroom spelling instruction. Often, spelling activities involve some kind of rote learning, rather than intellectual investigation, reflecting the belief that words are just strings of letters to be remembered. Often children are asked to learn their words by writing them out many times. Sometimes this is made more fun by asking them to do their lists in rainbow colours or stripes or spirals. When we ask children to learn lists of words by writing

them out many times, we are working from an assumption that English has no system – no rhyme nor reason – and that rote learning is the only option. And it is an option that is not helpful to poor spellers.

Marie writes of her daughter's experiences:

Ever since I can remember my daughter has done poorly with the initial spelling pre-test then after a week of rainbow words and phonics activities, got 100 per cent in the spelling test. She then goes to write a story and the number of spelling errors is still being highlighted. She has learnt nothing.

Letter-by-letter memorisation is very difficult; in fact there could scarcely be a more difficult way in which to learn to spell a word. When we do this, we completely strip a word of the system behind it – the very aspects of the word that would make it memorable and logical are taken away, and children are left instead with a string of letters that in most instances bears little resemblance to the sounds they can hear in the word. Spelling becomes a bewildering exercise in memorisation of some very abstract connections between sound and print. Instead we need to show children the stories within words, the linguistic threads that make the system of English much more visible.

All students, but particularly those who are low-achieving spellers, are best served by strategies attached to meaning. These are strategies that allow them to attach their own meaningful stories to words. Storytelling about how words have come to be spelled the way they are, and explicitly teaching the system behind words, helps children to connect the word and its spelling to other information in their brains. This helps them with the spelling of that particular word – and to see the system behind English spelling.

YACHT: WHERE DID *THAT* SPELLING COME FROM?

Let's look at the word *yacht* – a word often given in exasperation as an example of how random English spelling is.

Yacht is an imported word from Dutch, *jacht*. You can hear the 'ch' when you say it in Dutch (something like the 'ch' on the end of the

word 'loch'). And in Dutch 'j' is pronounced 'y'. So when the word first came into English in the 1600s it would have been pronounced so that you could hear all those letters. Over time, English preferences for pronunciation changed the way we say the word, but the spelling has stayed the same. This is also why we have words like *light* and *night* – we used to pronounce all the letters. Delving deeper into the history of the word reveals a story bound to make it all the more memorable to young spellers. The Dutch origin word *jacht* means 'hunt', and 400 years ago that is the name the Dutch gave to a new type of smaller, faster seacraft they had developed to hunt the pirate ships that were plaguing their international trade at the time. The jet boat of their day!

This brief investigation of the word *jacht* has untangled the phonological (sound), etymological (history) and morphological (meaning) threads of the word. When treated this way, spelling is not only easier but also provides a window on language that supports reading, writing and vocabulary development.

The following chapters contain many examples of how we can teach this way. There are spelling programs that teach children about word origins and the meaningful parts of words. This type of work is usually reserved for the 'advanced' children who have mastered their sounds, but the linguistic threads within words – sounds, meaning, origins and conventions – are neither hierarchical nor strictly developmental. We do not simply move from one to the other as we grow older. All children of all ages benefit from understanding how words work, and all children of all ages are engaged by the stories behind words.

Good spellers draw upon as many sources as possible to get the spelling of a word correct. Spelling bees are a good place to observe good spellers in action. They listen to the word carefully – phonology. They ask for its definition, and to hear it in a sentence – morphology. They ask for its language of origin – etymology. Often they write it on the back of their competitor's sheet as a visual check, and to be sure they are using a plausible pattern of letters – orthography. These are not the strategies of an intellectual elite – just children using every way possible into a word.