Spelling It Out

Spelling can be a source of anxiety for school children and working professionals alike. Yet the spelling of words in English is not as random or chaotic as it is often perceived to be; rather, it is a system based on both meaning and a fascinating linguistic history.

Misty Adoniou's public articles on the processes of teaching and learning spelling have garnered an overwhelming response from concerned parents and teachers looking for effective solutions to the problems they face in teaching English spelling to children. *Spelling It Out* aims to ease anxiety and crush the myth that good spelling comes naturally. Good spelling comes from good teaching.

Based on Misty Adoniou's extensive research into spelling learning and instruction, this book encourages children and adults to nurture a curiosity about words, discover their history and, in so doing, understand the logic behind the way they are spelled.

Spelling It Out is an indispensable guide for anyone who lacks confidence in spelling, and an essential resource for parents and teachers of children at all stages of their spelling journey.

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Spelling It Out

How Words Work and How to Teach Them

Misty Adoniou

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Preface

After writing an article titled 'Why some kids can't spell and why spelling tests won't help' for an online news site, I was inundated with emails from parents, teachers and grandparents concerned about the spelling skills of the children in their lives.

Spelling matters, it seems. Even in an age of spell check and auto correct – spelling matters.

Each request for help with spelling was made out of frustration that nothing they had tried so far was working, and each of their stories offered a clue as to why spelling is such a challenge for so many.

The spelling of words in English is not random and chaotic; it's a fascinating treasure hunt that lays bare the history of the language. My responses to the many queries were filled with ideas about how to get children interested in words, curious about why they are spelled the way they are and skilled in discovering their history.

The positioning of spelling as a treasure hunt is not merely an exercise in making spelling 'fun', although it certainly can be. Rather, it is opening up multiple pathways into spelling words that poor spellers simply haven't been given before.

As one reader wrote to me in response to these ideas,

> **This is fascinating! Honestly I am grinning from ear to ear and giddily skipping about. My husband kind of half glanced up at me and said 'what's going on?' All I could tell him was that you responded and told me all these incredible things I never knew! My son and I are going to have so much fun discovering words together. Seriously, what a blessing. Now I'm thinking maybe I should have known this study of words existed so I could have majored in that in college … truly fascinating stuff. It's never too late, right?**

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She is right. This is fascinating stuff, and it is never too late to learn. The aim of this book is to take interested parents, teachers and carers on that fascinating learning journey.

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Acknowledgements

My thanks to all the teachers who have worked with me over the years in research and professional learning workshops. Together we have worked to understand what works best in classrooms to enthuse students and improve their spelling outcomes. Special acknowledgement goes to the teachers of Tasmania, and Weetangera Primary School in Canberra. Their intensive work with me during the writing of this book guided the content and structure of the book so that it would include everything that teachers and parents would find most useful in a book about spelling.

About the author

Misty Adoniou is an Associate Professor in Language and Literacy. She began her career in education as a primary school teacher, teaching in Australia and in Greece before moving into higher education. She now teaches undergraduate and post-graduate teacher education courses in language and literacy at the University of Canberra in Australia.

She was lead writer for the national English as an Additional Language Teachers Resource for the Australian Curriculum, and has served on several national advisory boards including the Equity and Diversity Advisory Group (advising the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority) and the Orientation Consultative Committee (advising government on the settlement needs of refugees).

She has served as president of two national teachers' associations – TESOL Greece and the Australian Council of TESOL Associations – and currently serves on the Board of Directors of TESOL International.

She writes a popular column on education matters for the international news and opinion website *The Conversation*.

Glossary

abbreviation   a shortened form of a word that has become common usage, e.g. *refrigerator* becomes *fridge*

acronym   a word formed by the initial letters of a group of words, e.g. *laser* from *l*ight *a*mplification by the *s*timulated *e*mission of *r*adiation

affix   an affix is a bound morpheme that is added to the front or end of a base word

base words   base words are usually free morphemes to which bound morphemes are attached

bound morpheme   a morpheme that cannot stand alone as a single word, e.g. *centipede* has two bound morphemes: 'centi' (hundred) and 'pede' (leg)

compound words   two free morphemes joined to make one word

consonant blend   two consonants next to each other representing two distinct 'sounds' (phonemes), e.g. st, sl, br, bl, fr, fl, dr, cl

derivational affixes   affixes that change the meaning of the base word (e.g. un-) or the word class of the base word (e.g. -ment)

digraph   di (two) and graph (symbol) – a grapheme made of two letters representing one sound (phoneme), e.g. consonant digraphs sh, ch, th, wh, ph, ck and vowel digraphs ea, ee, ei, ou, oo etc

diphthong   one vowel grapheme that makes two vowel sounds (phonemes), e.g. the 'a' in *cake*, or the 'o' in *go*

eponym   a word named for a place or a person, e.g. *pavlova* for the ballerina Anna Pavlova

etymology   etym (reason) and ology (study of) – the study of the history of words

free morpheme   a morpheme that can stand alone as a single word, e.g. *cupboard* has two free morphemes: 'cup' and 'board'

grapheme   the written representation of a phoneme (sound); it can be a single letter or a group of letters

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heterophone   hetero (different) and phone (sound) – words that are written the same but have different pronunciations, e.g. I *wound* the bandage around my *wound*

homophone   homo (same) and phone (sound) – words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings, e.g. *cent*, *scent* and *sent*

inflectional affixes   affixes that change the grammar of the base word, e.g. ed, ing, s

morpheme   the smallest meaning unit within a word, e.g. *dogs* has two morphemes: 'dog' and 's'. 's' is a morpheme because it indicates that the word is plural

morphology   morph (change) and ology (study) – the study of the meaning components within words

morpho-phonemic   how linguists classify a language in which words are spelled according to both their meaningful parts and their sounds, e.g. English

onomatopoeia   onomato (name) and poeia (sounds like) – words that sound like the object or phenomenon being described, e.g. *oink*, *mumble* or *zoom*

onset and rime   describe the sound patterns within a syllable. The *onset* is the consonant phoneme or blend at the beginning of the syllable; the *rime* is the remainder of the syllable, e.g. w – in, gr – in

orthography   ortho (correct) and graphy (writing) – a description of the conventions of spelling. For example, drop the final 'e' before adding 'ing': hide – hiding

phoneme   the smallest unit of sound in a word that can change the word's meaning. For example, the different middle sound in c*a*t, c*o*t and c*u*t changes each word's meaning, hence they are three distinct phonemes in the word *English*

phonetic   how linguists classify a language in which words are spelled the way they sound, e.g. Finnish

phonology   phon (sound) and ology (study of) – the study of the sounds in words

portmanteau   a word made from a blend of parts of other words, e.g. 'smog' from 'smoke' and 'fog'. Note that portmanteaus are not compound words because they are not made from morphemes

prefix   an affix added to the front of a base word

schwa   a very common vowel phoneme that can be represented by each of the vowel graphemes as in wom*a*n, def*i*n*i*te, medi*u*m, small*e*st, harm*o*ny and by more than one letter, e.g. moth*er* and thor*ough*

suffix   an affix added to the end of a base word

syllable   a sound unit organised around a vowel phoneme, e.g. 'win' is one syllable; *window* has two syllables, 'win' and 'dow'. Note that syllables are not morphemes. Syllables break words into sound units, whereas morphemes break words into meaning units.

trigraph   tri (three) and graph (symbol) – a grapheme of three letters representing one phoneme, e.g. tch in *watch* or eau in *beautiful*

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