

Beginning spelling

Why English spelling is difficult

The problems with English spelling, as with reading, arise from the fact that Modern English is derived from several different sources (Celtic, Latin, Greek, Germanic/Saxon, French...). English is not, like Italian, a straightforward phonic language. It consists of:

26 letters

c 44 sounds

at least 70 different, common ways of writing those sounds

Each unit of sound (called a **phoneme**, from the Greek word for sound) can be represented by a single letter or group of letters (called a **grapheme**, from the Greek word for writing). Reading is the skill of working out which sounds (phonemes) each letter or letter group (grapheme) represents, then blending these together to read a given word. Spelling can be seen as the skill of working out which graphemes accurately represent which sounds.

The matching up of a phoneme to its grapheme is known as a **Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence** (a GPC).

Here are some helpful facts to remember when getting used to this vocabulary:

- one sound (phoneme) can be represented by a one, two, three or four letter grapheme
/a/ a, /f/ ph, /i/ igh, /o/ ough
- one sound can be represented by multiple graphemes (spelling alternatives):
/oa/ can be written as o, oa, ow, oe, o-e, eau, ough
- one grapheme (letter or letter group) can represent multiple sounds:
/ch/ can represent ch, sh or k (**chair**, **chef**, **school**)

Spelling rules

Fortunately, though English spellings might seem random to a child (or even an adult) there are certain rules which help us to spell a high percentage of words. You can find these rules in a very comprehensive book called 'The Writing Road to Reading' by Romalda Spalding, but this text is very detailed and goes beyond what most parents need. Here are the main [15 spelling rules](#). It's a good idea for parents to learn these so that they can reinforce them regularly when a child misspells a word.

Phonics versus memorising

We tend to think that learning spellings consists of memorising lists of words and writing those words when dictated as a spelling test, from memory. Some children will get on perfectly well in this way; they seem to instinctively see the patterns in the way that some children just seem to 'get' reading with barely any instruction. Charlotte Mason called memorising 'the royal road to spelling' (and advised against asking children to choose the correct spelling from a list with misspelled words as this would cause the wrong 'image' of the word to imprint itself on the memory).

If your child struggles to remember spellings, you could try the synthetic phonics approach which you may have used to teach reading. From a phonics perspective, the ability to spell accurately relies on a growing awareness of spelling alternatives and knowledge of spelling word patterns. Following the phonic approach, teachers emphasise the process of moving from sound to print (phoneme to grapheme) rather than relying on visual memory and recall of letter order and letter names. Children are encouraged to break words down into their respective sounds then work out which grapheme represents each phoneme. Of course, memory still plays an important role: ultimately, your child still needs to remember which grapheme is correct (**leef** or **leaf**?) and this comes from plenty of exposure to words, and practice in writing them. It is impossible to 'work out' phonetically.

As with reading, practitioners of synthetic phonics advise teachers not to describe letters as 'saying' sounds: strictly speaking, letters have no 'sounds', they simply prompt us to generate the sounds either aloud or in our heads. In reality, however, several popular programmes *do* talk about 'silent letters' (**kn**, **gn** etc) and 'magic 'e' (**cake**) simply because it helps children remember spellings - which, at the end of the day, is the whole point (see *Beginning Reading* for more on this).

Teaching spelling with synthetic phonics

If you want to follow this structured approach, follow the same pattern that you did with reading: start with very simple words which only use the graphemes already learned; build up to incorporate more complex alternative spellings and 'Tricky words'. Many teachers combine spelling and handwriting (i.e. children practise their handwriting by writing the words they are learning to spell, thus reinforcing learning). You might prefer to focus on reading then move onto spelling later; alternatively, if you want to combine spelling with reading but your child is not handwriting yet, you can dictate words and have your child use the 'grapheme' cards from his reading lessons to build into the given word.

The following Spellings lists (matched to the [Letters and Sounds](#) phonics programme - see *Beginning Reading*) can be used in various ways: along with the reading programme; later, once your child has 'got' reading; or simply as spelling lists to work through in the traditional

memorising/spelling test way. You don't need to follow the age suggestions strictly: as always, use these resources as and when you feel your child is ready for them.

[Phase 2](#)

[Phase 3](#)

[Phase 4](#)

[Phase 5](#)

[Phase 6](#)

Here are two simple alternative lists for the most common (and basic alternative) graphemes. They are adapted from the Jolly Grammar books and includes short sentences for dictation.

[Spelling list 1](#) (common graphemes)

[Spelling list 2](#) (alternative graphemes, mixed)

It is also a good idea to keep a spelling notebook in which your child can write any words he misspells in the course of his own writing (or just list these at the back of his spelling lists book). This is a good habit to get your child into so that later, when he is no longer doing spelling tests (usually by secondary school age, around 11-12), he will still note down and study any unusual words he is unsure of.

Commercial spelling books

There are lots of commercial spelling workbooks to choose from if you prefer 'off the peg' resources. All the usual main educational publishers offer spelling books: some are whole programmes aimed at schools (e.g. Nelson, Read Write Inc.), others are practice books aimed at parents who want to support their children's schoolwork (e.g. Letts, Collins, Schofield and Simms, CGP). Here are some example pages from the Nelson series: [Workbook 2](#) and [Pupil Book 2](#) (as is often the case, the older out of print editions of these books often have more challenging words and activities - and fewer busy pictures!)

One independently published series, which is designed for parents rather than schools, is [Complete Graded Spelling lists](#) , a no-frills resource with lists covering the whole of primary school (years 1-6). However, even better value might be the other three books in this series which as well as 50 word lists per year have a page of practice and (quite challenging) extension exercises with every list. There is one book for every two years (e.g. Complete Graded Spelling Lists with Spelling and Vocabulary Exercises [Years Three and Four](#)). Here is a sample page for the [list of -ow words](#) for Year 3 (age 7-8).

Finally, here is a more detailed chart of the [English Alphabetic Code](#), with some advice on how to teach spelling and reading.