



## **The Secrets of Spelling**

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

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'Tis the season of spelling bees, and we watch in awe as pint-sized kids spell words well beyond their vocabularies. Most of us don't aspire to win a spelling bee, but poor spelling is not a laughing matter for many children and adults. Children get graded on spelling in school from early on. Parents of children with poor spelling worry about their child's ability to produce the kind of written work needed to succeed in school. Adults who can't spell may feel ashamed, and fear they appear uneducated or unintelligent to others.

Why do some people pick up spelling so easily while others struggle? Is spelling simply rote memorization? Let's take a look at the various components involved in being a good speller.

**Phonetics.** Children in kindergarten and first grade use what is known as **phonetic spelling**. They spell words according to the sounds in the words. This is normal for that age, and in fact, is an important skill to have. Phonetic spelling requires solid **phonemic awareness** – or the knowledge of sound-letter associations. It also requires **phonological awareness** – or an awareness of the sounds in words. A child must be able to segment a word into its sound parts in order to employ phonetic spelling successfully. As words become longer, phonological awareness is needed to break words down into syllables. Solid phonological awareness skills are critical for long-term success in both spelling and reading.

**Visual Imagery and Sequencing.** If English was a purely phonetic language, phonetic skills would be sufficient to spell any word. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Good spelling requires skills in visual imagery and sequencing. Simply put, good spellers visualize longer words as they spell them. Many children have poor visual imaging and sequencing skills. Some may even "mirror spell" or spell words completely backwards. This is not abnormal at age 4 and 5, when "handedness" and directional concepts are still developing. If reverse spelling persists, however, it can be a symptom of dyslexia, a spelling disorder, or another learning disability. Fortunately, treatment can help build the visual imagery and phonemic sequencing skills needed for spelling.

**Word Patterns and Secret Rules.** Do you remember the rule "*i before e, except after c, and in words sounding 'eigh' such as neighbor and weigh?*" Many little known spelling rules exist besides this popular one. For example, did you know that the final 'k' on a one syllable word becomes a



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'ck' if the vowel is short? Look at these words and examine the vowel sound: *rack, oak, duck, week*. Spelling is typically taught through practice with word lists containing common word patterns and word families. Good spellers pick up these underlying patterns automatically; poor spellers do not. Some children may remember the spelling patterns long enough for a weekly spelling test, but forget them two weeks later. Learning some of these secret spelling rules can go a long ways towards improving spelling of everyday words. Explicit learning of common word parts and patterns (*-tion, -dge*), prefixes/suffixes, and syllable division rules can also improve spelling.

Why does anyone need to learn to spell in this age of electronic spell-check? Electronic spell-checkers are a wonderful tool, but you must get "close enough" in order for spell-checkers to recognize the word and offer plausible alternatives. You must also be able to distinguish common homonyms when selecting the correct alternative (e.g. *their/there, bear/bare*). Lastly, who doesn't want to be able to give a personal handwritten card or note to a loved one, without undue worrying about their spelling? The good news is that treatment can have a significant impact on spelling, even for adults who have never mastered the underlying foundational skills needed for spelling success.

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