

How to Teach Any Child to SPELL

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Chapter 1

Spelling Myths

Let's start our discussion on teaching spelling by dispelling a few myths. Deep down inside you may have known all along these were myths, but if you're like me, you were afraid to trust your gut instincts.

The first myth is, "**Good spellers memorize lots of spelling rules.**"

Maybe you learned to spell like I did. You learned to read and you read widely. You tried to write. After lots of reading practice, you began to notice when a word you wrote "looked funny." If a word "looked funny" you tried it another way. Why do some people spell well? Because they have good visual memories. Visual memory is the key to good spelling. So, if you happen to be a person with a strong visual memory, you remember how words look. You write a word and take a look at it. You say, "That looks funny. Let me try it a different way." Then you change a letter or two and say, "Now that looks right." That's exactly how a person learns to spell! Memorizing rules before you even try to spell is not the best way to learn to spell.

The second myth is "**Doing lots of spelling worksheets makes good spellers.**" Spelling is really complex thinking which occurs *as you're writing*. We can't learn to spell from workbooks alone. We learn principles about the way words are formed-the system of our language-with spelling workbooks. That's great! But a poor speller won't learn to be a good speller from workbooks. A poor speller will learn to spell from writing, followed by an analysis of his own errors, followed by *drill* and more *practice*.

Writing gives your speller the chance to try out spelling patterns and words. It gives him the opportunity to think for himself, "Oh, I've seen it this way." Besides the visual recollection of how the word should look, there has to be some time for reflection. What do I recall? What have I learned about how to spell the sound **/OW/**? When a child practices spelling in the context of writing, he learns to spell! He won't learn to spell by being told, "Fill in the blanks from the list." He'll learn to spell from being required to use and analyze what he's learned in the context of his own writing.

Some of you have good spellers at your house. You don't know how they learned to spell. But they learned to read, and a year or two later they were spelling. So how did your good spellers learn to spell? They became good spellers because of their strong visual memories coupled with their ability to sequence sounds (hear syllables.)

Poor spellers don't recall the way a word should look. Let's give them the opportunity to think about it. Instead of spending a lot of time in workbooks, practice **free writing** followed by **categorizing the child's own misspelled words** (according to the syllable patterns of our language) in an individualized spelling notebook. The student experiments with

spelling in his own writing. Then we gently guide him in categorizing his own misspelling in a notebook. Rules are applied only as need. Sure seems a lot easier to me!

Myth number three: **"Memorizing lists of words for a spelling test will make my child a good speller."** What about the child who makes straight A's on the spelling test and then misspells the very same words next week in his own writing? Memorization is not enough to solve the problem for poor spellers.

The most destructive myth: **"Good teachers always correct every misspelled word."** Go right ahead if your goal is to create "writer's block"! Ever have a child who can't think of anything to write? Think back. What do you do to the papers he *does* write?!

A secure child (one not subject to ridicule or a 'put-down') is willing to take risks-to try something challenging. The other night at dinner, six-year-old Meg wrote on her napkin, "I can ride bick." (Translate that: 'bike'.) I marveled at her application of the most recent phonics rule we had learned in reading: "ck" says /k/ at the end of a word. There was no way I was about to correct her-yet. She'll figure out her own error as she becomes a more fluent reader. Save absolute accountability for "published" pieces-like the letter they're sending to grandma (especially if grandma happens to be skeptical about homeschooling!) The choice is yours: Use the "Open up" or Clam up" approach.

And the silliest myth of all: **Writing a misspelled word 10 times will help you learn it.** Oh yeah? Try it and see.