

## SOME RULES AND SUGGESTIONS ABOUT SPELLING

Select from the following

**If your computer is equipped with PowerPoint, click on the PowerPoint icon to the right for a brief PowerPoint presentation on Spelling Rules. (The same material is covered below.) Click [HERE](#) for help with Powerpoint.**





Everyone who has difficulty with spelling words correctly can derive some comfort from knowing that some very good writers have been notoriously bad spellers. It's also comforting to bad spellers to know that this business of spelling seems to have little to do with intelligence. It has more to do with how we remember things. Some people, once they've seen a word spelled correctly, will never misspell that word again. Those are the people who, if you ask them how to spell a word, will first say, "Wait a second. Let me write it down." If you are not a strong visual learner, but learn in other ways, you will have to learn some other tricks to become a strong speller.

The following suggestions about spelling are only that—suggestions. Spelling, like vocabulary building, is ultimately a personal matter, and only a planned and sustained effort to improve spelling will have the desired results.

### For Writing Center and WebCT Users

**sp?** The **sp?** superscript indicates that the word preceding it is misspelled. There may be some information on this page that will help you learn the word's correct spelling. At the very least, however, you should look up the word in the dictionary and practice its spelling until you've got it right.

 The "sep" Problem Icon means either that the word needs to be separated, broken in two, or that you have broken a word in two that really needs to be combined. For instance, unless you are really stressing the negative element, the word can  not should be spelled as one word.

## Using A Spell-Checker

Writing with modern word-processors has changed the game of spelling somewhat, but not entirely. Spell-checkers are capable of discovering misspelled words for us — sometimes even as we write them — and most of them will suggest alternative spellings. Very good spell-checkers are even capable of asking whether we've confused a correctly spelled word with another word (e.g., we've used the word "they're," but do we really mean "their"?). Studies show, however, that papers written with the help of a spell-checker are only slightly better than papers written without a word-processor. The reason seems to be that a word-processor makes our

text look so professional that we're apt to overlook misspelled words. Never blame a spell-checker for failing to catch a misspelled word in your paper. That is your responsibility! Perhaps the best we can say about spell-checkers is that they've taken away another excuse for bad spelling.

## Using The Dictionary

For online use, we recommend the [Merriam-Webster's WWWebster Dictionary](#). For the purposes of checking your spelling, however, a small pocket dictionary will probably suffice. In fact, bookstores will often sell dictionaries that have nothing but spelling, and those can be very efficient, indeed, for this purpose. Small but powerful (and rather expensive) digital dictionaries are also available, and if they make looking up words more fun and if you have the money lying around to buy one, they can be a good investment. The important thing about owning any kind of dictionary, though, is that you must have it immediately at hand when you are writing. Putting the dictionary on a shelf in the den when you do your writing at the kitchen table doesn't do much good.

## Using Mnemonics

**Mnemonics** (Now there's a toughie to spell! It's pronounced as if that initial *m* didn't exist.) are little memory devices you can use to remember how to spell words. Geography students will remember that George Eliot's Old Grandfather Rode A Pig Home Yesterday. Some mnemonics seem more difficult to remember than the spelling they're supposed to serve. Mindy McAdams remembers the three *e*'s in *cemetery* as three tombstones in a row. When you think of *stationery*, think of the *e* in *envelope*. Does it help to think of the *r* in *separate* as separating two like letters?

Coming up with mnemonics to help you remember things is a device you probably use in other studies all the time. Extend the habit into your personal mission to improve spelling. Be as inventive as you wish and have fun with the idea. It will pay off in the long run.

## Homonyms and Plurals

Homonyms are words that sound alike or nearly alike but have different meanings and different spellings: affect-effect, they're-their-there, the list goes on and on. Our section on **NOTORIOUS CONFUSABLES** contains over 400 words that people find confusing. The words are used correctly in full sentences and brief definitions are provided in the status line of the browser window. Sometimes, if you have a properly configured browser, you can even hear the sentence being spoken.

Creating plurals in English is usually quite simple: just add *s* to the end of the word. Sometimes, however, it isn't that easy and the rules can be a bit perplexing. There is a section of this Guide devoted to the formation and spelling of **PLURALS** that should prove helpful.

## Sounding It Out

Writers who try to rely too completely on the sound of English words for hints on how to spell often have trouble with some of the peculiar sound-spell combinations in the language. One apocryphal (apokrifil?) story tells about a girl who, when asked to spell "fish," wrote GHOT on the chalkboard. It makes perfect sense, of course, if it's the same "gh" we see in *cough*, the same "o" we hear in *women*, and the same "t" we hear in *nation*. (See **NOTE** on this story below.) A thorough acquaintance with prefixes and endings and roots (see elsewhere in this section) will help some, and studying the way words are broken down into sound units will help also.

It also helps to pronounce words correctly in the first place. It's hard to spell *strictly* unless we hear that "t" in the word; and the words *February* and *library* must retain their first "r." If we try to change the noun

*accident* into an adverb, we'll end up with *accidently*, which is a really bad accident but is how many people say the word. Try, instead, to change the adjective *accidental* into an adverb: *accidentally*. (The same goes for *incidentally* and *coincidentally*.)

The ability to sound things out correctly doesn't help us much with *Wednesday*, though, especially with the inexplicable American pronunciation which puts an "nz" sound before the "d." And words like *often* and *handsome*, in which the "t" and "d" sounds have disappeared (at least in the U.S.), continue to defy phonetic spellers (fonetik spelurz). American author Mark Twain was keenly interested in the simplification of English spelling and his little essay called "[A Plan for the Simplification of English Spelling](#)" is included here.

## British Spellings

Writers who grow up in England, Canada, the Barbados, or any place where spelling habits conform to British preferences will be perplexed when the word *colour* comes back from an American instructor with a slash mark through the *u*. When Noah Webster started putting his dictionary together, he thought it would be a good idea to simplify some English spelling and that *-our* was one ending he thought we Americans could do without. Standard American spelling, ever since then, has been sometimes different from British, and it extends to other words as well. A good dictionary, even a good American dictionary, should account for these differences. Instructors should also be equipped to account for them, if not to allow for them.

American Spelling	British Spelling
canceled	cancelled
center	centre
check	cheque
color	colour
criticize	criticise
gray	grey
humor	humour
judgment	judgement
labor	labour
license	licence
realize	realise
theater	theatre
tire	tyre
valor	valour

### Rule #1: "I before E except after C";

This rule, designed to help us remember how to spell words such as *receive* and *chief*, seems so promising in its simplicity at first.

- achieve, believe, bier, brief, hygiene, grief, thief, friend, grieve, chief, fiend, patience, pierce, priest
- ceiling, conceive, deceive, perceive, receipt, receive, deceit, conceit

But then things get complicated: it doesn't work with words pronounced "ay" as in *neighbor*, *freight*,

*beige, sleigh, weight, vein, and weigh* and there are many exceptions to the rule: *either, neither, feint, foreign, forfeit, height, leisure, weird, seize, and seizure*.

Still, the rule is relatively simple and worth remembering.

## Rule #2: “Dropping Final E”

When adding an ending to a word that ends with a silent *e*, drop the final *e* if the ending begins with a vowel:

- advancing
- surprising

However, if the ending begins with a consonant, keep the final *e*:

- advancement
- likeness

(However, if the silent *e* is preceded by another vowel, drop the *e* when adding any ending: *argument, argued, truly*.)

**Exceptions:** to avoid confusion and mispronunciation, the final *e* is kept in words such as *mileage* and words where the final *e* is preceded by a soft *g* or *c*: *changeable, courageous, manageable, management, noticeable*. (The word *management*, for example, without that *e* after the *g*, would be pronounced with a hard *g* sound.)

## Rule #3: “Dropping Final Y”

When adding an ending to a word that ends with *y*, change the *y* to *i* when it is preceded by a consonant.

- supply becomes supplies
- worry becomes worried
- merry becomes merrier

This does not apply to the ending *-ing*, however.

- crying
- studying

Nor does it apply when the final *y* is preceded by a vowel.

- obeyed
- saying

## Rule #4: “Doubling Final Consonants”

When adding an ending to a word that ends in a consonant, we double that consonant in many situations. First, we have to determine the number of syllables in the word.

Double the final consonant before adding an ending that begins with a vowel when the last syllable of the word is accented and that syllable ends in a single vowel followed by a single consonant.

- **submit** is accented on the last syllable and the final consonant is preceded by a vowel, so we double the *t* before adding, for instance, an *-ing* or *-ed*: *submitting, submitted*.
- **flap** contains only one syllable which means that it is always accented. Again, the last consonant is preceded by a vowel, so we double it before adding, for instance, an *-ing* or *-ed*: *flapping, flapped*. This rule does not apply to verbs that end with “x,” “w,” “v,” and “y,” consonants that cannot be

doubled (such as "box" [boxing] and "snow" [snowing]).

- **open** contains two syllables and the last syllable is preceded by a single vowel, but the accent falls on the first syllable, not the last syllable, so we don't double the *n* before adding an ending: *opening, opened*.
- **refer** contains two syllables and the accent falls on the last syllable and a single vowel precedes the final consonant, so we will double the *r* before adding an ending, as in *referring, referral*. The same would apply to *begin*, as in *beginner, beginning*.
- **relent** contains two syllables, but the final consonant is preceded by another consonant, not a vowel, so we do not double the *t* before adding an ending: *relented, relenting*.
- **deal** looks like flap (above), but the syllable ends in a consonant preceded not by a single vowel, but by two vowels, so we do not double the final *l* as in *dealer* and *dealing*. The same would apply, then, to *despair*: *despairing, despaired*.

## Rule #5: "Adding Prefixes"

Generally, adding a prefix to a word does not change its spelling. For some reason, the word *misspelling* is one of the most often misspelled words in English. See the material on adding prefixes in the section on [Vocabulary](#). See, also, the section on the creation and spelling of [Compound Nouns and Modifiers](#).

- unnecessary, dissatisfied, disinterested, misinform

## Working on Your Spelling

Improving your spelling skills is largely a matter of personal commitment: looking up a word you're not sure of, keeping the dictionary at hand, keeping a list of words you know you have trouble with.

One site on the World Wide Web is particularly helpful in spelling: the [Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee Home-Page](#). A section on that page, called "Carolyn's Corner" is especially helpful in terms of discovering and understanding the rather obscure rules and patterns that govern spelling. ("Carolyn's Corner" takes the summer months off.)

Click [HERE](#) for an extensive list of words that are commonly misspelled. From this list, you should compile your own list of words that look odd to you or aren't spelled the way you would spell them. Look up their definitions and origins and use them in sentences. Carry around the list and review it from time to time until the proper spelling occurs naturally to you. The spelling quizzes below, especially 4 through 7, are based on lists of frequently misspelled words.

	<p>For additional help with spelling, see <a href="#">Chapter 14</a> of <b>Sentence Sense: A Writer's Guide</b>.</p>
---	--



## Spelling Quiz Number One



## Spelling Quiz Number Two



## Spelling Quiz Number Three (Endings)



## Spelling Quiz Number Four (with sound)



## Spelling Quiz Number Five (with sound)



## Spelling Quiz Number Six (with sound)



## Spelling Quiz Number Seven (with sound)

\*The story about fish being spelled as "ghoti" or "ghot" is usually said to have been introduced by playwright George Bernard Shaw, a strong advocate for spelling reform. In *The American Way of Spelling*, Richard L. Venezky) writes:

Gh*o*t*i* can be pronounced fish no more than bulls can fly or crocodiles sing. Yes, <gh> can only be pronounced /g/ as in ghost, gherkin, and ghou*l*. The letter <o> in women is pronounced as in tip, but women is the only word in the English language in which this correspondence between spelling and sound occurs—a singularity from which no other words take their cues for pronunciation. And <ti> can sound like in ship only in endings such as <tion> and <tient>. At the end of a word, <ti> cannot be pronounced like fish. (And similarly for <t>.)

—note from Scott Caplan  
tenth-grade English student at the North Broward Prep Schools



**Guide to Grammar  
and Writing**



**Principles of  
Composition**



**Index**

*The Guide to Grammar and Writing is sponsored by the **Capital Community College Foundation**, a nonprofit 501 c-3 organization that supports scholarships, faculty development, and curriculum innovation. If you feel we have provided something of value and wish to show your appreciation, you can assist the College and its students with a tax-deductible contribution.*

*For more about giving to Capital, write to CCC Foundation, 950 Main Street, Hartford, CT 06103. Phone (860) 906-5102 or email: [jmcnamara@ccc.commnet.edu](mailto:jmcnamara@ccc.commnet.edu). Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.*