

How Does Spelling Work?

Introduction

Perspectives

The real voyage of discovery consists
not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

— MARCEL PROUST*

In the late 1970s, I was a restless teenager with four younger siblings, living in a beach town in Northern California. At that point, given a choice between going on a family outing and washing dishes all night, I'd opt for the dishes. I changed my mind one day when my parents announced that the whole family would be driving up to San Francisco to see *Chicago*. Wow! They were one of my favorite bands, and I listened to their music on the radio every day. Seeing them in concert would be fabulous and, even though I would be doing it with my family, I was all in.

When the day arrived, my brothers and sisters and I excitedly piled into the car. Alas, during the drive up, it gradually became clear that we were not going to see the band *Chicago*. We were on our way to see a musical that was also, deceitfully, called *Chicago*. When we arrived, I trudged into the building and sat through the show, bitterly disappointed and unimpressed.

That evening, I experienced an early production of a show that would become iconic—a production filled with music, dance, and imagery. Yet I can't remember anything about what I saw or heard. All I remember is how excited I was to see a beloved band and how crushed I was when that didn't happen. Because I was expecting something else, I couldn't absorb and appreciate what was taking place right in front of me.

Our experience with English spelling today is similar. Our culture has developed some mistaken ideas about spelling and, as a result, our writing system is frequently characterized as not measuring up to other languages—languages like Finnish, Italian, or Spanish—where words can be spelled fairly accurately based on just their

*Although Proust's statement is often interpreted and quoted as I have done here, this wording is not quite a literal translation. See <https://clearingcustoms.net/2013/12/17/what-marcel-proust-really-said-about-seeing-with-new-eyes/> (accessed June 11, 2021).

pronunciation. But this is rather like comparing *Chicago*, the musical, to *Chicago*, the band. We can't judge a musical based on expectations for a concert, and we can't evaluate the writing system of one language based on how others work. Each writing system is uniquely fitted to a particular language and, as a result, English spelling isn't like Finnish or Italian or Spanish: it's optimized for the unique characteristics of the English language. Written English is a coherent and powerful system, yet it's often misjudged as defective because we're expecting something else.

In order to fully understand and appreciate our writing system, I will ask you to set aside, for the time being, what you know about spelling and permit me to show you what may be a new perspective. The process of rethinking spelling can be challenging and even somewhat disorienting. But the results are exhilarating and freeing. Once we are able to see the spelling of English words as part of an integrated, coherent system, spectacular things happen.

- We are able to explain why *comfort* is spelled with an *o-r* rather than the *e-r* we find in words like *expert*.
- We understand why *answer* is not spelled "anser" and why *hasten* must include a *t*.
- The spellings of words like *been*, *says*, and *does* no longer appear to be simply frustrating exceptions to the rules.
- We see the value of spelling words differently (such as *by*, *buy*, and *bye*; or *in* and *inn*) even though they are pronounced the same.
- The relationships between pronunciation and spelling in words like *eye* and *I* make perfect sense.

Without an awareness of the *whys* of spelling, rote learning is our only option for learning to spell the words listed above. This is particularly burdensome for those with dyslexia—students that many of us passionately want to help.

You may be anticipating that we will be discussing a familiar idea: that English spelling is difficult to learn because the spelling of so many words simply cannot be understood. Perhaps you're expecting yet another approach or method for learning a system often characterized as riddled with irregularities. But by the end of our time together, I hope you will have come to appreciate a very different idea.

All those years ago, because I was expecting *Chicago* the band, I couldn't appreciate the fabulous experience of *Chicago* the musical. Today, because we're expecting that English spelling should represent the pronunciation of spoken words as clearly and directly as possible, we may be missing its power, beauty, and coherence. This book will explain aspects of the writing system that are hidden in many descriptions of spelling. Once we bring them to light, they allow all of us to

become confident, curious readers and spellers. In the hands of teachers, this knowledge reveals numerous ways to improve reading and spelling instruction. It helps parents and family members support children in developing literacy. It also pulls open the curtain so we can sit back and enjoy a marvelous show.

Chapter One

How Do We Spell?

If someone asked you to learn the spelling of a new word, how would you do it? For most of my life, the skill that made me a reliably good speller was my ability to remember the letters in a written word by rote. I certainly used my understanding of the relationships between pronunciation and spelling, but after seeing a word a few times, I was confident of its spelling based on whether or not it “looked right.” Today, when I encounter a new word, I examine its spelling in a different way, looking for the information that will allow me to understand all aspects of its written form—information that we will discuss in this book. But from the very beginning, as a literate adult who is good at spelling, I’ve always needed to start with the written form of a word in order to understand and remember it.

When children are taught to spell, however, they learn to do something different. We know that simply asking students to memorize the spelling of words does not prepare them to become good readers and spellers. In many systematic approaches, then, students are taught to pronounce a word and isolate the sounds in that spoken word—the segments of pronunciation they hear or feel. They are asked to write a single letter or a combination of letters (such as an *o*, *t*, *sh*, or *ea*) for each individual part of the pronunciation. Children are taught spelling rules for when to use particular letters and letter combinations as components of a complex alphabetic code, intended to help them make a direct translation from speech to spelling. Embedded in these practices is an assumption. Spelling is believed to be primarily a process of translating the pronunciation of an individual word into written form.

This assumption about spelling is understandable when we look at the words often used to introduce students to reading and writing—a limited set of one-syllable words where a direct translation from pronunciation to spelling works without fail. Children begin their journey into literacy with words like *hum*, *pen*, *day*, *ship*, *lock*, *storm*, *match*, and so on. They learn to identify each segment of pronunciation in these spoken words. Then they learn the most common spelling for each pronunciation, along with some predictable variants. Both of these tasks can be challenging (for dyslexic students, especially). Even so, with well-designed instruction from a skilled teacher, most students will be able to successfully translate from pronunciation to an

accurate spelling when working with carefully selected words in a controlled environment.

We realize, of course, that this process doesn't work for all one-syllable words—words like *does, been, was, says, said, from, they, you, one, of*, and many others. Because words like these can't be spelled directly from their pronunciation, they are frequently categorized as spellings that “don't follow the rules.” And we know that many one-syllable words could be spelled more than one way: *mane, main; roam, Rome; see, sea; tax, tacks; dew, due*, and *do* are examples, but we encounter this sort of challenge everywhere. Here also, the assumption that underlies most spelling instruction can't account for many common spellings.

Nevertheless, in the initial phases of literacy instruction, children are able to spell many words successfully by translating directly from pronunciation to spelling. As words get longer, though, it gets harder. Students more frequently encounter words where a translation from speech to spelling doesn't work, even when they are accurately applying the procedures they've been taught.

What would you write if you were a student trying to spell *comfortable* based on the way you pronounce it in connected speech? Take a look at an American eighth-grader's spelling of this word in Figure 1.1. This student has done her best to translate directly from speech to spelling, thinking about patterns that she knows from other words and representing each syllable in her pronunciation of the word *comfortable* quite reasonably as “comfterble.” Yet her analysis doesn't yield an accurate spelling. Translating directly from pronunciation to a written form doesn't work with this word.

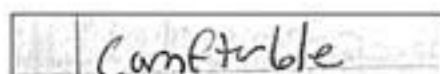


Figure 1.1

How about the word *comfort*? Spelling from pronunciation alone doesn't work so well with this word, either. Writing the default, expected spelling* for each segment of its pronunciation would result in “cumfert.”

With the word *fort*, however, a typical systematic approach to spelling can predict the written word. Once students learn that the most common spelling for the pronunciation of “or” is the combination of letters *o-r*, they will be able to analyze the pronunciation of *fort* and spell it correctly. We often find words like *fort* on curated lists such as this:

fort	porch	pork	born
norm	fork	torn	cord
orb	thorn	lord	port
sort	snort	horn	torch

* The concept and usage of a **default grapheme** is described in the illuminating *Real Spelling Toolbox 2*. You can read about this concept (without a subscription) in a passage from 2008 titled “The Concept of the ‘Default’ Choice,” in the sample theme “Learning from Love.” www.tbox2.online.

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English spelling has an undeserved reputation as unreliable and riddled with frustrating quirks. In the pages of this book, you'll find stories, examples, and explanations that will reorient your perspective and reveal the integrated system that makes sense of the spelling of English words.

This book will answer questions like these:

- Why is there a W in *answer* and an L in *talk*?
- What's going on with words like *move* and *comfortable*?
- Why isn't *hasten* spelled like *basin* or *mason*?

These spellings make sense once we are aware of all that's conveyed by a written word—information about so much more than just its pronunciation. This book will introduce the structural (morphological) framework that is present in every English word, reveal the (etymological) signals of relationships that are embedded in our most interesting spellings, and provide enlightening evidence to support a reevaluation of some traditional spelling rules.

The compelling explanations of English spelling contained in this book allow all of us to understand and reconstruct many spellings rather than memorizing them, while expanding vocabulary and deepening reading comprehension. This is particularly important for those with dyslexia.

Set aside what you know about spelling for the moment, and take a journey below the surface of words. Together, we'll uncover the surprising coherence, depth, and clarity of the English writing system.

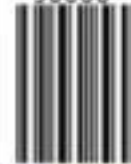
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