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Users' Guide To Spelling

Introduction - Why Spelling Is Important

Incorrect spelling is heavily penalised in our society - so heavily that it keeps people from getting jobs they want or prevents them from moving up to better positions. Inability to spell gives people complexes just as much as unsureness about grammar or proper methods of dress and social behaviour. The development of literacy skills is vital to every student's success at school. The ability to spell accurately is an integral part of their literacy development. Poor spellers are normally inhibited in their creative writing efforts, they often have low self-esteem which impacts on their performances in other curriculum areas.

Spelling with the exception of a limited number of the commonest words is a matter of individual learning. No two children wish to make use of exactly the same words in their written expression. Children are at different stages of spelling development. It makes sense to use currently available technology to assess the stage of a child's spelling development and to use a program which builds on their existing skills and remediates gaps or weaknesses they may have.

Some children are excellent spellers. From casual observation, they appear to have an innate ability to spell words correctly. They quickly establish strategies to recognise sound sequences in words, grapho-phonetic (sight-sound) relationships, visual patterns and they have a good knowledge of word meanings.

Within the first few years of school, most children begin to realise that the spelling patterns of the English language are irregular. Students who are naturally apt at spelling soon learn that despite its irregularity, many English words can be grouped according to letter patterns, and that there are a number of spelling rules which hold true in the majority of cases. Rules and patterns account for 80-85 per cent of English words.

How Children Learn To Spell

Research shows that competent spellers tend to draw on three pools of information. They develop strategies based on grapho-phonetic, visual and morphemic information.

Grapho-Phonic (Sight-Sound) Information

Grapho-phonetic information has to do with knowing that sounds can be represented by symbols. The key concepts include knowing letter names, knowing sounds can be represented by symbols, knowing that there are different spelling patterns for the same sound, and knowing which spelling patterns represent each sound in the English language. Beginner writers tend to rely heavily on this grapho-phonetic information as they do not possess a lot of knowledge of written language.

Visual Information

Visual information is used by competent spellers to assess whether a word looks 'right'. Many people have to write a word down to check if they can spell it correctly. We use knowledge about written language, including spelling patterns in the English language, and possible letter sequences. We quickly realise that the sequence of letters 'vin' is possible but, 'tmb' is not, while 'nt' may be used at the end of a word but never at the beginning. To employ a good visual approach to spelling, we need a good knowledge of spelling patterns in the English language, and the knowledge that one spelling pattern may represent different sounds, eg *snow*, *how*.

Morphemic (Word Meanings) Information

The third source of information competent spellers rely on, is morphemic information. This refers to a knowledge of the structure of words and their meanings. The word 'transported' has three morphemes: 'trans-' is a prefix meaning 'across', 'port' originating from the Latin meaning 'to carry', and the suffix '-ed' which tells us that it is the past tense of the verb 'to transport'. Knowledge of the structure of words, their meanings and the function of word parts, greatly assists children in learning spelling generalisations.

Self-Monitoring Strategies

As well as developing strategies based on grapho-phonetic, visual and morphemic information, a closer observation of competent spellers reveals that they use another strategy to improve their spelling skills - self-monitoring. Good spellers develop self-monitoring skills. They take responsibility for their own learning. They check for errors. They ask someone or consult a dictionary if the word does not 'look right', or they are uncertain of its meaning. A large part of developing a positive, self-monitoring approach to spelling is related to self-image. Building confidence, especially in a child who has developed a negative attitude to spelling and written tasks, is a slow process and can only be achieved in a supportive and positive environment.

How To Motivate And Assist Your Child

Some things you can do to improve your child's spelling skills are outlined below.

Foster An Interest in Words

Try to foster an interest in words. Provide them with a wide variety of literacy experiences. Read books with them and take time to discuss the structure and origin of words. Before a child is asked to spell any word you need to be sure that they fully understand its meaning. A positive attitude is one of the most significant factors in improving spelling skills.

Play Word Games

Play word games, such as - Scrabble or Pictionary, with your children, or encourage them to play with their friends. Make sure your children realise that learning to spell is a continuous process - it continues throughout their life. Explain that many adults have difficulty with spelling.

Establishing Useful Spelling Rules

All beginning writers soon recognise that the English language is not a regular predictable language. The good spellers realise that despite its irregularity many English words can be grouped according to letter patterns and there are a number of spelling patterns and there are a number of spelling rules which hold true in the majority of cases. Rules and patterns account for 80-85% of English words.

Research by educationalists on the teaching of spelling rules has highlighted two relevant points. Firstly, the teaching of spelling rules should be limited to those rules that have wide applicability and few exceptions. Secondly, the teaching of spelling rules is generally more successful with children of above average intelligence who have a specific spelling disability. Trying to teach spelling rules to slow learners and children with severe spelling problems can be confusing and counter productive.

Some general spelling rules with wide applicability are listed below:

SHORT AND LONG VOWEL SOUNDS

Rule : When a silent “e” is added to the end of a word with a short vowel sound, the vowel sound changes to a long vowel sound.

e.g. pin + e = pine
tub + e = tube
mop + e = mope

LONG VOWEL SOUNDS

Rule : When two vowels occur consecutively in words, they make the long vowel sound of the first vowel.

e.g. pain
coat
flue
pie
meat

WORDS ENDING IN SILENT “e”.

Rule 1 : When a word ends in silent “e”, you drop the “e” before adding an ending which begins with a vowel.

e.g. hope + ing = hoping
paste + ed = pasted
race + er = racer
fame + ous = famous

Rule 2 : When a word ends in “ce” or ‘ge” you keep the “e” when adding “ous” or “able”.

e.g. manage + able = manageable
advantage + ous = advantageous
notice + able = noticeable

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“Activity Sheets”

Activity Sheet 1

(Three letter CVC words)

Choose a word from the box to fill the space in each sentence.

| | | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| mud | mob | led | cab | fed |
| big | job | kid | bud | bib |

(1) That will turn into a beautiful flower.

(2) A is another word for taxi.

(3) There was a of fans around the rock star.

(4) The truck was covered in

(5) These shoes are too

(6) A is a young goat.

(7) She the horse from the paddock.

(8) The baby's is covered in food.

(9) My sister has a at the factory.

(10) We the animals in the afternoon.

