

# When Spelling Matters

Developing writers who  
can spell and understand  
language

Doreen Scott-Dunne

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## Introduction: Why Spelling Matters

As a classroom teacher, I used to send a note home asking students to bring in typical writing samples — lists, informal notes, reminders, letters, instructions, directions, recipes, anything their parents would approve of them bringing. Then I made a bulletin board of a variety of texts. I had told parents that these writing samples would be displayed, and they were quite relaxed about it. However, when parents came to class and saw their lists or notes there, a few were motivated to edit and correct spelling, even to improve the note paper, because their writing was on public display in the classroom. Several parents requested that I return certain pieces to them and then replaced them with perfectly edited work. At the time, I used this experience to illustrate to students that a note or list is informal, but once writing goes on display, usually spelling matters.

Spelling does *not* matter when you are celebrating the first attempts of Grade 1 writers to create text, however. Their work is worthy of display, even if it is not perfect. If displayed in a hallway for parents to see, though, I suggest that it be edited, with the original copy beside it. We need to remember that our goal is to achieve fluency with young writers; nevertheless, we also want to teach students multiple word patterns and see their knowledge of how words work growing daily. As a student's knowledge grows as a writer and as a worker with words, so will the student's confidence grow as a speller.

### The Need for Clear Communication and Positive Impressions

Spelling matters when there is a need for clear communication because both writer and reader have to understand what is being said. Misspelling can sometimes interfere, like an annoying distraction, as the reader struggles to interpret the misspelled words.

Spelling matters when work is published at the end of the writing process and when work will be shared publicly for others to read. That sharing could include blogs because, while like a journal in some respects, blogs have a wider audience. Checking spelling on a blog would be a personal decision related to the impression that the writer wants to make. Spelling matters when text is in final draft, to be assessed by the teacher.

Spelling matters when formal letters are written because multiple misspellings can create a bad impression of the writer to the reader. Teachers will know that accurate spelling is particularly important on a job application, on a resumé, or in an article to be published in the school newsletter.

Spelling matters in a reference context when, for example, the student is composing a word list, copying a word pattern, or preparing a personal dictionary.

Spelling matters when a book is published, either as a commercial novel or as a short story for a class anthology. It also matters when a report or other text form is completed, ready to be submitted to the teacher for final marking.

Spelling really matters when teachers are writing report cards, as these records are being read by the principal, students, and parents. Teachers need to model good spelling!

Spelling is very much about appearances if the writing is a public piece.

## A Focus on Getting Out the Thoughts

Spelling does not matter when students are writing responses to a book they have read. The thinking is what matters then — not the spelling.

Spelling does not matter in first- or second-draft writing because the focus is on composing, not on mechanics.

Spelling does not matter in journal writing because the writing is informal, not public. Indeed, spelling does not matter in any kind of informal writing, as long as it does not interfere with meaning. So, if a student writes, “come to my howse tonight” to a friend, the friend will understand the message.

Spelling does not matter when texting a friend, either, although rereading text is important — when texting, the spellchecker may create a word that was unintended by the writer and which changes the meaning. However, if texting is someone’s major means of communication, then it’s important to remember how words are *really* spelled for more formal writing.

On the home front, spelling does not matter when listing groceries to buy or jobs to be done. Only the author needs to understand the content.

## A Long Way from “I Have a Cat”

So, spelling does not matter all the time, but it does matter some of the time. For teachers, then, it is important to identify the occasions when they should expect accurate spelling and to recognize the best contexts for enabling students to learn to spell correctly.

We have already come a long way from students writing “I have a cat” when they did not even have a pet but could spell the words *have* and *cat*. Now we might have a young student writing, “The big idea in this book is betrayal,” referring to a book that the teacher had read aloud. Note that if this is a reading response and *betrayal* is misspelled, it is more important for the student to identify the big idea, through synthesis, than to spell *betrayal* correctly. As time goes on, and knowledge of words increases, the student will spell the word correctly, too.

The key premise of this book is that children learn to spell by investigating how words work and by building spelling patterns for themselves. These inquiries into language will help students to understand how words work in the context of spelling and how words fit into different patterns, which they can access when they write. They should then be able to apply their growing word knowledge directly to editing their writing, as application is key to their success. Lessons that take the developmental nature of spelling into account and can be taught explicitly are outlined here.

*When Spelling Matters* also provides teachers with ways to help their students deal with the hard task of editing. Students need to be able to edit their work

for specific items, such as checking for the 50 most common words, for endings, or for plurals. They also need to check whether they have used the correct homonym, since *there* and *their*, for example, are more often misused than misspelled. When students learn the word *there* in the context of “somewhere, anywhere, and everywhere,” and the word *their* in the context of “my, his, her, and our,” then perhaps they will remember to use the correct word in context, and thus spell it correctly.

## Spelling as Manifesting a Love of Words

The problem with formal spelling instruction is the lack of transfer from rote memorization of words to application of this knowledge in writing and editing. Spelling application is enabled by problem solving with words, working out their structure, and perceiving how they fit into patterns. This understanding reflects that spelling is not a low-level, rote-memory activity, but a high-level cognitive skill.

A viable solution for the teaching of spelling in today’s classroom is to have students develop a love of words — indeed, to create students who are word-smiths, lovers of metaphors and word origins. Students can come to see language as a valuable resource to be explored deeply. My experience has shown that once students gain this perspective, they are more likely to have something to say when they write and will produce pieces of writing worth editing and reading.

In summary, here is what matters to helping your students become proficient spellers:

- opportunities for inquiry into word patterns
- a growing developmental knowledge of word structure
- opportunities to write and think and solve word problems

Thinking always matters because learning to spell always involves *thinking about words* while *working with words*. Spelling is not some cosmetic device but a way in which to help writers communicate with purpose and clarity.