

# WHY ENGLISH SPELLING SHOULD BE UPDATED.

## **English spelling is too difficult for most people.**

Even after 11 years at school barely half of all English speakers become confident spellers.

Italian children can spell accurately after just 2 years at school.

Italy has only half as many identified dyslexics as England.

- Around 7 million British adults and 40 million US adults are functionally illiterate.
- English speaking adults always come near the bottom in international studies on literacy.
- In 1992 Dr. Lamb reported on the poor spelling standards of university students in the UK.
- In 1998 Bernard Richards reported on the poor spelling of many students at Oxford.
- In all UK schools there are some teachers who regularly make spelling mistakes on school reports.

## **English often spells identical sounds in several different ways.**

The EE-sound, for example can be spelt as in:

**seem, team, convene; sardine, protein, fiend; people, he, key, ski; debris, quay.**

This sound occurs in at least 436 words out of the 6856 commonly used ones which we examined carefully.

Spellers have to learn and remember which alternative spelling is used in each one of them.

There are no rules for deciding when to use which. This takes many years of learning, practice and testing.

If we always spelt the EE-sound simply as 'ee', we could save learners a lot of time and effort.

## **Updating a spelling system can make it much easier to learn.**

Denmark and Sweden have very similar languages. These neighbours also educate their children in similar ways: young children are allowed to learn mostly through play and formal education does not begin until the age of 7. Sweden updated its spelling in the last century. Danish spelling is still very much as Swedish used to be before it was reformed. Swedish spellers always come near the top in all in international comparisons on standards of literacy, Danish spellers near the bottom.

A large-scale study in 1963-64 proved that literacy in English can also be achieved easily if the writing system is based on regular spelling. The research compared 837 children learning to read and write with the Initial Teaching Alphabet and 837 children who were taught these skills with normal English spelling. The ITA children scored higher in reading and writing tests. They also used a much wider vocabulary. Teachers using ITA were also impressed by their pupils' more favourable attitude to learning.

**The pronunciation of words changes over time and languages have to update their spelling systems or they become divorced from pronunciation and very difficult to learn. English spelling has been simplified a little over the centuries. We no longer write, 'atte, hadde, olde, shoppe', or use the letter 'u' for both the V-sound and the U-sound. 'Over' used to be written 'ouer'. English spelling is in need of similar further improvements.**

## **The basic English spelling system is more complicated than most.**

English spells many identical sounds differently when they occur in different positions in a word.

For example, the Sh-sound is spelt as in **shop, station, vicious and session;**

the long A-sound as in **plate and play;**

the long I-sound as in **mine and dry.**

**For this reason English has 90 basic, dominant spelling patterns for its 43 speech sounds.**

## 84 of the 90 basic English spelling patterns have exceptions.

<b>A</b>	cat	plait	<b>-ER</b>	better	visitor, grammar	<b>R</b>	ripe, car	<b>write, rhubarb, are</b>
<b>E</b>	pet	threat, said. system, pretty,	<b>-ARY</b>	ordinary believabl	battery, luxury	<b>S</b>	send	<b>centre, scienc e</b>
<b>I</b>	sit	women	<b>ABLE</b>	e	credible	<b>-ce</b>	fence	<b>sense</b>
<b>O</b>	pot	what, cough some, country,	<b>-EN</b>	hasten	abandon, urban	<b>-cy</b>	agency face,	<b>controversy</b>
<b>U</b>	mum	flood	<b>-ENT</b>	pertinent	dominant	<b>-ce</b>	fleece	<b>base, geese</b>
		wait, eight, great	<b>ENC</b>					<b>consider, counsel</b>
<b>A-E</b>	mate	bright, cycle,	<b>E</b>	evidence	acceptance	<b>-c-</b>	decide	<b>sure,</b>
<b>I-E</b>	bite	kind loan, blown,	<b>-AL</b>	denial	fuel, pistol	<b>Sh</b>	shop, rush mushroo	<b>moustache issue,</b>
<b>O-E</b>	bone	roll, sold	<b>DE-</b>	decide	divide	<b>-sh-</b>	m	<b>machine diversion,</b>
<b>U-E</b>	duty	beauty, feud lean, theme,	<b>IN-</b>	induce	enquire	<b>-ction</b>	action	<b>extension passion,</b>
<b>EE</b>	seen	thief, seize	<b>CH</b>	chip	cello	<b>-ation</b>	ration	<b>fashion mission,</b>
<b>OO</b>		soup, move,						
<b>(1)</b>	spoon	fruit, rule	<b>D</b>	dog	blonde	<b>-ition</b>	ignition	<b>fission</b>
<b>OO</b>		put, would,				<b>-</b>		
<b>(2)</b>	wood	woman	<b>F</b>	film	photo, rough	<b>ession</b>	session	<b>discretion</b>
						<b>-</b>		
						<b>ussio</b>		
<b>OU</b>	scout	brown	<b>G</b>	gap, bag	ghost, league	<b>n</b>	discussion	<b>cushion</b>
	autum	awe, all,						<b>facial,</b>
<b>AU</b>	n	shawl, salt		get, give	guess, guilt gem, giant, gy	<b>-tial</b>	essential	<b>controversial pretentious,</b>
<b>OI</b>	oil	oyster they, weigh,	<b>J</b>	jet, jig cage,	m	<b>-cious</b>	vicious	<b>luscious</b>
<b>-AY</b>	play	matinee	<b>-ge</b>	urge	spinach	<b>-cian</b>	musician	<b>gentian</b>
<b>-Y</b>					majesty, subject			
<b>(1)</b>	daddy	monkey, coffee- die, bye, buy,	<b>-ge-</b>	agent				<b>two, debt,</b>
<b>-Y</b>								
<b>(2)</b>	fly, sky	high	<b>H</b>	hand	who, whole	<b>T</b>	top, act	<b>cassette</b>
		blow, toe,		keep,				<b>democrat,</b>
<b>-O</b>	go	though	<b>K</b>	bleak	chemistry, disc	<b>-te</b>	separate thing	<b>combat</b>
<b>-OW</b>	now	bough, thou flew, blue, do,	<b>-ck</b>	rock	mac, trek	<b>Th</b>	(soft)	<b>this (sharp)</b>
<b>-OO</b>	too	through	<b>-ck-</b>	rocket	occupy, second	<b>Th</b>	bother	<b>theme</b>
<b>-UE</b>	due	few, view	<b>c</b>	cat, cup	chaos, karate	<b>V</b>	have	<b>87 surplus -e</b>
						<b>not -</b>		
<b>-OY</b>	toy	buoy heart,	<b>qu</b>	queen	choir, acquire	<b>vv</b>	never	<b>chivvy, navy</b>
<b>AR</b>	cart	banana, aunt	<b>x</b>	taxi	accent, except	<b>W</b>	willow	<b>when, whole</b>

-	there,						
<b>ARE</b>	their, air, aerie						
-	care	<b>L</b>	leg, feel	candle	<b>Y</b>	you	use, unite
	fur, Sir, earn,						
<b>ER</b>	her	<b>M</b>	man, sun	bomb, autumn	<b>Z</b>	zip	xylophone
	more, your,			knee, gnat,		wise,	
<b>OR</b>	for	<b>N</b>	net, ten	gone	<b>-se</b>	arose	size, froze
	door, oar						citizen,
		<b>Ng</b>	ring	meringue	<b>-s-</b>	absorb	possess
		<b>P</b>	pen, cup	hiccough	<b>Zh</b>	vision	azure, fissure

### Several basic spelling patterns are not followed by over 100 words

1. The 'ee' pattern is not used in at least 305 words: bead, beak, beam, bean; legal, lenient, legion ...
2. The -er endings pattern of 'mother, father, brother, sister' has at least 140 exceptions: actor, grammar, centre ...
3. The -en endings pattern of 'hasten, soften, weaken' is not followed by 134 words: abandon, urban, cousin ...
4. The -a...e- pattern of 'cake, make, take, same' is not followed by 107 words: main, great, eight, straight ...

### The exceptional spellings are the real problem.

#### Learning them takes much time and effort.

In addition to mastering the basic spelling rules, learners of English have to memorise

- a) All the words which do not follow the basic rules
- b) How the basic rules are disobeyed.

Hundreds of words do not follow the common phonic patterns. They are spelt in unpredictable ways.

### At least 3500 common words do not follow the 90 basic English spelling patterns.

German has only about 800 such words, Spanish 600 and Italian merely 400. That is why Italian spelling can be mastered quickly while learning to spell English takes a long time and is never quite conquered by millions of learners.

### Words which could be easy have difficult, unpredictable spellings:

frend - friend; sed - said; ses - says; Wensday - Wednesday; sistem - system; cof - cough; cum - come; meel - meal; teech - teach; deleet - delete; sardeen - sardine, shreek - shriek; theef - thief; weerd - weird; ate - eight; nite - night; buty - beauty; groop - group; moov - move; yor - your; yung - young.

**Spelling errors** committed by pupils in tests and examinations show that pupils have little difficulty mastering basic English phonics. Even students who achieve low examination grades misspell very few words which follow the basic rules.

### Students misspell words which do not follow the basic spelling rules

1. They fail to double the 'correct' consonants: acount, aply, ocurred.  
They double wrong consonants instead: accross, affraid, gett, leggs.

2. Spellers often fail to insert silent letters: bild, dout, frend, yor, yung.  
They put the surplus letters in the wrong place: freind, detb, lauhg.  
They insert surplus letters: chaeous, nervous, suddenly, vigourously, gowing, hellow.
3. When memory fails children try to spell logically: sed, thay, cupl, conjest, wate.
4. When identically sounding words are spelt differently, spellers often pick the wrong alternative, e.g. there/their, here/hear, two/too/to, allowed/aloud, see/sea, by/bye/buy, weather - whether.

Such difficult spelling differences are totally unnecessary. Hundreds of other words have one spelling for different meanings, or even different pronunciations, e.g. river bank - bank account, chocolate bar - bar food, able to do / can - can of beans, eat a date - date someone, postage stamp - stamp your foot; to live - live show, take the lead - lead weight, a good read - read it yesterday, loud row - row a boat, sticky slough - slough off.

## **Consonant doubling is the biggest English spelling problem.**

English consonant doubling does not really operate according to rules at all.

### **Around 1000 ordinary words obey the basic rule**

of doubling a consonant after a short and stressed vowel in a longer word, in order to keep that vowel short. [Stressed vowels are underlined in the examples.]

e.g., 'batted, netted, fitted, rotten, running, difficult, baggy, budget, rocket, silly, mummy, funny, poppy, regretted' - (Cf. fatal, legal, libel, total, duty).

### **Another 1000 common words contradict the basic rule.**

1. Many words have doubled letters after *unstressed* vowels, [Unstressed vowels are in *italics*] e.g. accommodation, annouy, apply, attract, correct, oppose, travelled.
2. Many occur at the end of short words where they serve no purpose whatsoever, e.g., odd, egg, fluff, buzz, smack, peck, kick, block.
3. Hundreds of words fail to double a consonant after a short stressed vowel:  
gallery - galaxy, palace ...; dilemma - lemmon, memmory...;  
gimmick - criminal, image...; common - commic, domminant ...;  
plodder - moddel, moddern...; sorry - forrest, florrist, morral ...;

### **Words which disobey the consonant doubling rule are also difficult to read.**

This makes people uneasy about using words of foreign origin.

It is especially disadvantageous to children who do not have literate and educated English parents.

## **How did English spelling become so difficult?**

### **It started so well.**

English was one of the first non-Latin / non-Greek languages to develop a writing system of its own. Early English spelling was very consistent and predictable.

### **After the Norman Conquest in 1066.**

Norman French became the official language of England. Nobody, apart from a few monks, continued to write English. A century later not many important or wealthy people even spoke English. It became the spoken language of just the lower classes.

### **England regained its own identity around 1400.**

Continental Normandy was gradually conquered by France. In 1399 Henry IV was the first king after more than three centuries to claim the throne of England speaking English rather than Norman French. English then became the official language of England once more.

### **English writing had to be rediscovered.**

During the intervening centuries the English language had changed. The peasants had done away with most of the Latin grammar rules which English had before the Conquest, and which many other languages still have. The language had also acquired many different words and sounds from Norman French. The clerks who had the job of re-inventing a writing system for English had only written French or Latin before. They mostly continued to spell according to French rules (double, couple, route, sure, centre).

### **From 1476 printers took charge of things.**

The early printers were nearly all foreign. Caxton, who set up the first printing press in London, was English but had lived mainly in Belgium and had written mostly in Latin. His assistants all came from the Continent. English spelling rules were therefore devised almost entirely by non-native speakers of English. Printers often also added letters to the last word of a line to make the whole text look neater. They were paid by line and habitually inserted letters into words to earn more money. Many of their whims and tricks eventually became rules of English spelling.

### **During the Renaissance.**

Many Latin and Greek words were imported into English during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The imports were allowed to keep their Latin spellings, because Latin and Greek were regarded as superior to English. This has given us the hundreds of words which according to English spelling rules should have a doubled consonant after a short stressed vowel, but because they are spelt according to Latin rules, they do not have them: abolish, abominable, banish, body, capital, category, habit, hideous, lily, perish, petal, statue, study, topic, tropical, value, vanish, vomit...)

### **English spelling has remained virtually the same since 1755.**

Dr. Johnson stamped his authority on English spelling with his famous dictionary. In his day many words were still spelt differently by different writers. He chose his preferred versions, or linked different meanings to different spellings, e.g. 'there - their', paying very little heed to pronunciation. Many of our worst problems are *due* to him. His work is now very much *due* for a revue.

### **If we made many of the difficult spellings simpler**

by letting them follow basic English spelling rules,

**English spelling would become**

**easier to learn**

**and**

**easier to teach.**

More people would become confident about writing.

Children would have more time to learn many other useful things and ... to play.

*This pamphlet was compiled by Masha Bell (2001) .*

# Why English Spelling should be updated

- A quarter of English-speaking children cannot read properly by age 11
- Around 7 million adults in the UK and 40 million in the US are functionally illiterate
- Nearly half of all English speakers have spelling problems

Nearly all Italian children learn to read in couple of months  
and can write well after just 2 years at school

Learning to read English is difficult because it has too many contradictory spellings

go - <u>do</u>	<u>here</u> - <u>there</u> - <u>were</u>	came - <u>camera</u>	<u>callous</u> - <u>calling</u>
<u>home</u> - <u>come</u>	<u>hero</u> - <u>heron</u>	<u>cater</u> - <u>caterpillar</u>	<u>clamber</u> - <u>chamber</u>
<u>stone</u> - <u>gone</u>	combine <u>e</u> - <u>engine</u>	<u>later</u> - <u>lateral</u>	<u>swam</u> - <u>swamp</u>
<u>count</u> - <u>country</u>	<u>five</u> - <u>give</u>	<u>plane</u> - <u>planet</u>	<u>herring</u> - <u>erring</u>
<u>mouth</u> - <u>youth</u>	<u>earth</u> - <u>hearth</u>	<u>cloth</u> - <u>both</u>	<u>petty</u> - <u>pretty</u>
cond <u>one</u> - anem <u>one</u>	<u>heave</u> - <u>heaven</u>	donkey - <u>monkey</u>	<u>limber</u> - <u>climber</u>
<u>bison</u> - <u>prison</u>	<u>treat</u> - <u>great</u>	<u>bomb</u> - <u>tomb</u> , <u>comb</u>	<u>plinth</u> - <u>ninth</u>

Learning to write English is even harder  
because almost all English spelling patterns have some exceptions

<u>ham</u> - <u>salmon</u>	<u>pause</u> - <u>pawn</u>	<u>due</u> - <u>few</u>	<u>film</u> - <u>photo</u>	<u>taxi</u> - <u>accent</u>	<u>lotion</u> - <u>ocean</u>
<u>pet</u> - <u>threat</u>	<u>oil</u> - <u>oyster</u>	cap <u>able</u> - vis <u>ible</u>	<u>gap</u> - <u>ghastly</u>	<u>sum</u> - <u>bomb</u>	<u>facial</u> - <u>palatial</u>
<u>sit</u> - <u>system</u>	<u>cart</u> - <u>heart</u>	monet <u>ary</u> - cemeter <u>y</u>	<u>get</u> - <u>guess</u>	<u>need</u> - <u>knee</u>	music <u>ian</u> - gent <u>ian</u>
<u>pot</u> - <u>what</u>	<u>care</u> - <u>air</u>	better - grammat <u>ar</u>	<u>bag</u> - <u>league</u>	<u>ten</u> - <u>gone</u>	<u>vicious</u> - <u>luscious</u>
<u>mum</u> - <u>some</u>	<u>her</u> - <u>fur</u>	bitten - button	<u>jet</u> - <u>gem</u>	<u>ripe</u> - <u>write</u>	caut <u>ious</u> - anx <u>ious</u>
<u>put</u> - <u>foot</u>	<u>for</u> - <u>more</u>	essence - bal <u>ance</u>	<u>agent</u> - <u>subject</u>	<u>car</u> - <u>are</u>	act <u>l</u> - <u>debt</u>
<u>mate</u> - <u>wait</u>	<u>play</u> - <u>they</u>	du <u>al</u> - <u>fuel</u>	<u>hand</u> - <u>whole</u>	<u>send</u> - <u>centre</u>	separat <u>e</u> - acrob <u>at</u>
<u>bite</u> - <u>bright</u>	dink <u>y</u> - monk <u>ey</u>	wrest <u>le</u> - <u>vessel</u>	<u>carrot</u> - <u>karate</u>	<u>face</u> - <u>base</u>	re <u>vel</u> - <u>revving</u>
<u>bone</u> - <u>loan</u>	<u>fly</u> - <u>high</u>	decide - d <u>ivide</u>	<u>kept</u> - <u>chemistry</u>	mattress - <u>notice</u>	<u>willow</u> - <u>whinge</u>
<u>duty</u> - <u>beauty</u>	<u>go</u> - <u>slow</u>	<u>inspire</u> - <u>enquire</u>	<u>rock</u> - <u>trek</u>	<u>shop</u> - <u>sure</u> , <u>chute</u>	<u>zip</u> - <u>xylophone</u>
<u>seen</u> - <u>lean</u>	<u>now</u> - <u>ough</u>	<u>chip</u> - <u>cello</u>	<u>dusk</u> - <u>disc</u>	<u>passion</u> - <u>ration</u>	<u>wise</u> - <u>size</u>
<u>fool</u> - <u>rule</u>	<u>too</u> - <u>flew</u>	bond - <u>blonde</u>	rock <u>et</u> - <u>occupy</u>	ignit <u>ion</u> - <u>mission</u>	absorb - <u>possess</u>
<u>out</u> - <u>doubt</u>	<u>toy</u> - <u>buoy</u>		<u>queen</u> - <u>choir</u>	ment <u>ion</u> - <u>pension</u>	vis <u>ion</u> - <u>azure</u>

Some English spelling rules have hundreds of exceptions

1. The **-er** ending pattern of *mother*, *father*, *brother*, *sister* has 140 exceptions: *actor*, *grammar*, *sculptor*...
2. The **ee** pattern of *need* *seed* is not used in at least 323 words: *bead*, *beak*, *beam*, *chief*, *police*, *tedious*, *weird*..
3. Around 1000 ordinary words obey the basic rule of **doubling a consonant** after a short and stressed vowel: *cabb*age, *gall*ery, *stamm*er, *dilemm*a, *sorr*y ; while another 1000 common words disobey this rule: *cab*in, *gal*axy, *cam*era, *lem*on, *for*est, or use doubled consonants for reasons which are unrelated to keeping a stressed vowel short: *abbrev*iate, *alleg*e, *amm*unition, *arr*ive, *correc*t.

There are at least 3500 commonly used English words which are spelt unpredictably

German has only about 800 irregularly spelt words, Spanish 600 and Italian fewer than 400.

That's why Italian spelling can be learnt quickly

while learning to spell English takes a long time and is never completely mastered by millions of learners.

## Spelling errors which pupils commit in tests and examinations show that learners find it difficult to cope with the inconsistencies of English spelling

1. They leave out oddly doubled consonants (*acount, aply, ocurred*) or double by analogy (*accrosss, affraid, leggs*).
2. When identically sounding words are spelt differently, they often pick the wrong alternative, e.g. *there/their, here/hear, two/too/to, its/it's allowed/aloud, see/sea, by/buy, weather/whether*.
3. They fail to insert silent letters (*bild, freind, yung*), put surplus letters in the wrong place (*freind, detb*) or insert surplus letters (*chaeous, nervous, suddenly, vigourously, hellow*).

The inconsistencies of the present English spelling system have neither a logical historical basis nor do they add anything to the beauty of written or spoken English. Modern editions of Shakespeare's plays do not use his spelling conventions. If we simplified many of the difficult current English spellings, by letting them follow basic English spelling rules, the English language would not change in any way, but English spelling would become easier to learn and easier to teach. More people would become literate and confident about writing, and children would have more time to learn many other useful things - and to play.

### How did English spelling become so difficult ?

**After the Norman Conquest in 1066** Norman French became the official language of England. During the next three centuries only a few monks continued to write English. Important and wealthy people even stopped speaking it. English became the language of mainly the lower classes.

**When England began to re-establish its own identity around 1350** the English language had changed a great deal, and English writing had to be rediscovered. Early modern English writers, like Geoffrey Chaucer and William Tyndale who translated the Bible into modern English in 1525, tried to give English a consistent spelling system. Their efforts were repeatedly frustrated. Many people had only written French or Latin before and continued to spell according to French rules (double, couple, route, sure, centre).

**When books began to be printed in England in 1476** the newly invented spelling system was undermined because nearly all the early London printers were foreign. They were usually paid by the line and often inserted additional letters into words to earn more money. They regularly also added extra letters to the last word of a line to make the whole text look neater. Many of their spelling errors, whims and tricks eventually became accepted English spellings.

**In 1525 William Tyndale's English Bible** was condemned as sacrilegious by the Pope of Rome and the English bishops. Nevertheless, even before Tyndale was executed in 1536, many people wanted to possess Tyndale's bible. It was much reprinted in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In order to reduce the chances of censorship, Tyndale's authorship was often disguised, and many of his consistent spellings were changed too, to make the reprints appear more like genuine new editions.

**During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries** many Latin and Greek words were imported into English. These imports were allowed to keep their Latin spellings, because Latin and Greek were regarded as superior to English. This has given us the hundreds of words which according to English spelling rules should have a doubled consonant after a short stressed vowel, but because they are spelt according to Latin rules, they do not: abolish, abominable, banish, body, capital, category, habit, hideous, lily, perish, petal, statue, study, topic, tropical, value, vanish, vomit...)

**By 1700 the different influences had made English spelling much as it is now** and Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 fixed our present system. Spelling mainly by dictionary, rather than phonic rules or common sense has been the order of the day ever since.

### Updating a spelling system can make it much easier to learn

Denmark and Sweden have very similar languages. These neighbours also educate their children in similar ways: young children are allowed to learn mostly through play and formal education does not begin until the age of 7. Sweden updated its spelling in the last century. Danish spelling is still very much as Swedish used to be before it was reformed. Swedish spellers always come near the top in all in international comparisons on standards of literacy, Danish spellers near the bottom.

English spelling has also been updated occasionally. For example, we no longer write, '*atte, hadde, olde, shoppe*', or use the letter '*u*' for both the V-sound and the U-sound. '*Over*' used to be written '*ouer*', even in Shakespeare's day. English spelling is in dire need of similar further improvements.