

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.

A	cat	plait	-ER	better	visitor, grammar	R	ripe, car	write, rhubarb, are
E	pet	threat, said. system, pretty, -	-ARY	ordinary believabl	battery, luxury	S	send	centre, scienc e
I	sit	women	ABLE	e	credible	-ce	fence	sense
O	pot	what, cough some, country,	-EN	hasten	abandon, urban-	cy	agency face,	controversy
U	mum	flood	-ENT	pertinent	dominant	-ce	fleece	base, geese
A-E	mate	wait, eight, great bright, cycle,	ENC					consider, counsel sure,
I-E	bite	kind loan, blown,	-AL	denial	fuel, pistol	Sh	shop, rush mushroo	moustache issue,
O-E	bone	roll, sold	DE-	decide	divide	-sh-	m	machine diversion,
U-E	duty	beauty, feud lean, theme,	IN-	induce	enquire	-ction	action	extension passion, fashion
EE	seen	thief, seize	CH	chip	cello	-ation	ration	mission, fission
OO	(1) spoon	fruit, rule	D	dog	blonde	-ition	ignition	
OO	(2) wood	put, would, woman	F	film	photo, rough	-ession	session	discretion
OU	scout	brown	G	gap, bag	ghost, league	n	discussion	cushion facial,
AU	autum n	awe, all, shawl, salt		get, give	guess, guilt gem, giant, gy	-tial	essential	controversial pretentious, luscious
OI	oil	oyster they, weigh,	J	jet, jig cage,	m	-cious	vicious	
-AY	play	matinee	-ge	urge	spinach	-cian	musician	gentian
-Y	(1) daddy	monkey, coffee- die, bye, buy,	-ge-	agent	subject			two, debt,
-Y	(2) fly, sky	high blow, toe,	H	hand keep,	who, whole	T	top, act	cassette democrat,
-O	go	though	K	bleak	chemistry, disc	-te	separate thing	combat
-OW	now	bough, thou flew, blue, do,	-ck	rock	mac, trek	Th	(soft)	this (sharp)
-OO	too	through	-ck-	rocket	occupy, second	Th	bother	theme
-UE	due	few, view	c	cat, cup	chaos, karate	V	have	87 surplus -e
-OY	toy	buoy heart,	qu	queen	choir, acquire	vv	never	chivvy, navy
AR	cart	banana, aunt	x	taxi	accent, except	W	willow	when, whole

-	there,						
ARE	their, air, aerie						
-	care	L	leg, feel	candle	Y	you	use, unite
	fur, Sir, earn,						
ER	her	M	man, sun	bomb, autumn	Z	zip	xylophone
	work					wise,	
	more, your,			knee, gnat,			
OR	for	N	net, ten	gone	-se	arose	size, froze
	door, oar						citizen,
		Ng	ring	meringue	-s-	absorb	possess
		P	pen, cup	hiccough	Zh	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**, **nervious**, **suddenely**, **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. accommoddation, annoyy, 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 - lemon, memory...;
gimmick - criminal, image...; common - comic, dominant ...;
plodder - model, modern...; sorry - forest, florist, moral ...;

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 16th 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) .