Intentional Spelling: Seven Steps to Eliminate Guessing

Michelle Newlands

As a literacy consultant, I helped many teachers with their language arts programs. One area that consistently generated questions was spelling. Should we teach spelling explicitly? Should we allow students to learn to spell at their own rate? Does spelling really count?

Spelling is not just memory work; it is a process of conceptual development (Templeton, 2002). It does count. Spelling also has a lot to do with how we feel about our writing. A mistake in letter arrangement can not only make you feel foolish, it can also shake your self-esteem. This is true of both adults and children. Students will avoid using words they cannot spell. When this occurs, they lose opportunities to build their vocabulary and reading skills.

Some teachers argue that dedicating hours of instructional time to the memorization of spelling rules is time wasted. While I do not suggest a return to the “target skill then drill” method of spelling instruction, I advocate for dedicating time to providing targeted instruction that fosters spelling skill development and mastery.

Strategy instruction can be inserted into any effective writing program and can contribute to creating more critical, reflective writers who understand the way words work. By following these seven basic principles, students can ramp their spelling skills from good to great:

1. Know the rules.
2. Observe patterns and trends.
3. Apply a strategy.
4. Analyze errors and correct them.
5. Try a new strategy if at first you don’t succeed.
6. Trust your instincts and exhibit confidence.
7. Have fun!

The goal of effective spelling instruction is to create fluent writers, not perfect scores on the spelling test (Rosencrans, 1998). The bane of any teacher who has administered a weekly spelling test is that words that were mastered on Friday are forgotten by Monday. Furthermore, there is little transfer of word knowledge to students’ independent writing (Beckham-Hungler & Williams, 2003). The seven principles promote accuracy and provide students with strategies that will help them reason through the spelling of difficult words with confidence.

To increase the effectiveness of the seven principles, two guidelines should be followed. First, to increase retention, students should study words that are at their instructional level—not at their level of frustration. Teachers who use commercial spelling programs often teach the weekly word lists with the entire class. One drawback with this approach is that consideration is not given to the differences in students’ spelling ability, literacy skills, and vocabulary development.

To compensate, teachers can use the test-practice-test method to determine student readiness for the intended word list. For example, during the Monday language block, the teacher can administer a pretest of the word list. After the pretest, each student’s errors can be calculated quickly. Students with an accuracy rating of 50% or better can continue their spelling work with the list words; students below this score should not be required to learn these words, because the error rate indicates that the student is working at the level of frustration.

Rather than discard the entire word list, words within each student’s independent spelling repertoire might be substituted to generate a complete word list for study and future dictation. Table 1 is a helpful chart to determine the level of difficulty for spelling lists of 10 words in order to target words that are within each student’s cognitive realm (Morris, 2008). This is one way to differentiate the weekly spelling list based on student readiness.
Table 1  
**Difficulty Level of a 10-Word Spelling List**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct spellings</th>
<th>Learning opportunity index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 to 10 of 10 (80–100%)</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 7 of 10 (50–70%)</td>
<td>Instructional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 to 4 of 10 (0–40%)</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second guideline for the selection of spelling words is to include words that students can read and understand. If the student cannot read the word, it is likely that she will be challenged to remember its spelling pattern. According to Schlagal’s (2002) research review, it is the balance between known and unknown words that is the best predictor of students’ ability to master and retain correct spelling of words.

**Principle 1: Know the Rules**

An understanding of the most common spelling generalizations provides students with the ability to spell high-frequency words correctly and gives them the skills they need to make reasonable predictions when faced with unfamiliar words. Students should have opportunities to learn about common spelling patterns and generalizations as they encounter them in their reading or writing. Generalizations should also be taught explicitly in a writer’s workshop or similar instructional approach.

For example, noticing that a student has written *responsible*, a teacher might ask, “When do you use *-ible, and when is *-able correct?” Following a word study during which students examine words ending in *-ible and -able*, the teacher can ask students to describe what they notice.

Students should be given opportunities to develop their own generalizations using raps, rhymes, or chants as memory aides. Teachers can consult English orthography books such as Moats’s (2000) *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* to enhance their knowledge of English orthography to support their students in developing helpful generalizations.

**Principle 2: Observe Patterns and Trends**

Students benefit from having opportunities to examine words in purposeful and guided lessons that encourage them to develop their powers of observation and their critical skills of inquiry. Weekly spelling tests might be derived from words with similar spelling patterns. A useful study for fourth graders, for example, might involve words ending in *-ion, -ian, -sion, -tion, or -ation*. After students have examined these words, a question to stimulate thinking skills might be framed, “What do you notice about the root words and the endings?” When students develop generalizations from their own word exploration and observations, they stand a better chance of remembering the patterns.

As students advance in their understanding of patterns, they can be introduced to words that have the same sound but different spellings. The *lay* sound, for example, has a variety of different spelling patterns (*delay, break, trade, whey, weight, e-mail*, etc.). Students could also progress to a study of homophones (words with the same pronunciation but different spellings, as in *so, sew, and sow*) and homographs or heteronyms (words with the same spelling but multiple pronunciations and meanings, as *alternate, console, or dove*).

**Principle 3: Apply a Strategy**

There are a number of strategies students can be taught during creative writing lessons to support independent spelling skills. A possible strategy sequence might be presented as follows:

- **Visualize**—think about what the word looks like.
- **Try alternative spellings, and then select one.**
- **Think of a word that is similar and use that word to help spell the new word (e.g., *muscle → muscular*).**
- **Sound it out.**
- **Use an analogy (e.g., if you know *night* you can spell *flight*).**
- **Check a word list or word bank.**
- **Use a dictionary.**
- **Ask a friend.**
- **Ask the teacher.**
 Principle 4: Analyze Errors and Correct Them

We often mistakenly believe that children can master the conventional spelling of new words after a week of word activities and a Friday morning spelling test. When we ask students to memorize a list of words, they use semantic memory (Nunley, 2003)—the gatekeeper of information, including facts, dates, rules, and formulas. The problem with semantic memory is that it takes many exposures to the information before it can be successfully and routinely retrieved (Tileston & Darling, 2009).

The stress of a spelling test has the potential to interfere with retrieval. Episodic memories offer much more reliable pathways. Information stored in the episodic memory is related to the learning context. Your ability to recall what you were doing and where you were on the morning of September 11, 2001, for example, shows how strong episodic memories can be.

Our challenge as teachers is to create instructional episodes that support the storage of information related to conventional spelling. When spelling errors occur, students should analyze them. In this process of self-evaluation, students examine the types of errors they made and classify them (Rosencrans, 1998).

Figure 1 shows an error analysis chart in which the student has recorded both the correct spelling of the list word and the spelling mistake. With the teacher’s help, the student classifies the error with a check mark in the appropriate column. In this activity, students engage episodic memory through a metacognitive analysis of their spelling behavior and gain an understanding of the types of errors they make and how to correct them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spelling word</th>
<th>Misspelling</th>
<th>Phonemic error</th>
<th>Orthographic error</th>
<th>Missed letter(s)</th>
<th>Insertions</th>
<th>Letter reversals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>because</td>
<td>bcas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>babies</td>
<td>babys</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Primary Junior Department, Hamilton Board of Education (1993).

Figure 1: Error Analysis Chart

 Principle 5: Try a New Strategy if at First You Don’t Succeed

Spelling is not always easy. There are words that look wrong, even when they are correctly spelled. How many of these words are misspelled?

- genealogy
- inoculate
- knowledgeable
- millennium
- questionnaire
- superseded

If you answered “None,” congratulations—you are a terrific speller!

When words look wrong even when spelled correctly or have very challenging letter patterns, memorization seems the only solution to mastery. One alternative to rote memorization is the use of mnemonics—that is, sentences, phrases, or acronyms that help in the retrieval of information from memory.

Spelling mnemonics can be effective for mastering conventional spelling by creating relationships between letters and words and relating difficult words to a familiar concept or situation (Tarasoff, 1990). For example, to memorize the spelling of because, you might try “Big elephants can always understand small elephants”; for rhythm, “Rhythm helps your two hips move.” Students will enjoy developing their own mnemonics to support their ability to remember conventional spelling.

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Principle 6: Trust Your Instincts and Exhibit Confidence

Do you remember the 10 spare minutes you had at the end of an exam, which you used to agonize over what you had done or had failed to do? That struggle between faith and doubt is what many poor spellers must contend with when confronted with a word that doesn’t look quite right. We need to instill in all our aspiring spellers a belief in their own ability to be competent, capable, and successful.

Carefully crafted spelling lessons will support the development of effective spelling strategies. As students develop more spelling skills and word knowledge, they will also develop the ability to use their instincts to find effective, efficient strategies to move from the known to the unknown with confidence, accuracy, and consistency.

To develop spelling confidence, students need opportunities to engage in activities that encourage word exploration. Word cards, noncryptic crossword puzzles, word searches, word bingo, and word building games like Scrabble all help to build spelling skills and word knowledge. Teachers may choose to integrate their own activities into their language arts program to provide students with opportunities to build their word knowledge and thereby increase their spelling confidence.

Principle 7: Have Fun!

Developing lessons on spoonerisms, alliteration, and orthography are great ways to explore words and address spelling mistakes that originate from student writing. A variety of games can be developed from the weekly spelling list. For example, the longest word on the list can be presented to students in a scramble of letters. The task for students is to create as many words as possible from the letters and then rearrange the letters to form the list word.

There are endless games that can be developed from the traditional spelling list. The important rule to remember is to keep the focus of spelling lessons on thinking critically, reasoning things out, and analyzing what was done. The focus of any spelling lesson must be on the writing students produce.

Teachers can support spelling skill acquisition through the use of these seven principles as part of a daily writing program that encourages playing with words to promote the ability to spell.

References
Templeton, S. (2002). Effective spelling in the middle grades: It’s a lot more than memorization. Voices From the Middle, 9(3), 8–14.

Newlands is a vice-principal at Queen Victoria Junior Public School, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; e-mail Michelle.Newlands@tdsb.on.ca.