

# DOES SPELLING MATTER?

1

Shakespeare couldn't spell!  
So why should I have to?

On just one page of *Much Ado About Nothing* we find:  
                  cosin / cousin;    me / mee;    enemy / enemie;    onelie / only.  
If Shakespeare took SATS or GCSE, he'd lose marks for spelling!

Before printing was invented, people wrote words as they sounded.  
Printing brought some uniformity, but even then spelling varied.  
Printers often added extra letters to fill up a line.

By the time Dr. Johnson published his dictionary in 1755, spelling was standardised;  
correctness became important.

Modern technology makes accurate writing even more important.  
Computers, faxes and e-mail all depend on the written word.

\*What impression would an estate agent make with this?  
    This house has a large haul and a dry seller. It has high sealings, a  
    Victorian stile great and wide window baize. The garden has current  
    bushes, plumb trees and flour boarders.

Computer wizardry may not help:  
my spellcheck queried 'Victorian' and suggested plume for 'plumb'.

\*And how about this business letter?  
    Sum wan from hour sails teem wood knead two meat ewe four too daze  
    next weak. Pleas right and confirm plaice and thyme.  
    (The computer suggested replacing 'knead' by kneed.)

\* Can you rewrite both items correctly?  
\* Try some (correctly spelt) technical or scientific writing on a computer spellcheck  
and see how well that will fare.

# SOUNDS OK TO ME

2

It seems logical to write a word as it sounds.  
Many languages, like Spanish, do this much of the time.  
They have one letter, or group of letters, to represent each sound.  
This is called phonetic spelling.

Some English spelling is phonetic:

The cat sat on the mat

There is a clear link here between letters and sounds, once you learn that th represents one sound rather than two.

The frantic kid hid the fag in his bag but a big lad got it.

As the pedantic organist sat on a log, a red ant bit him.

\* Write a story for a young child, using ONLY words with phonetic spelling, (that sound just the way they look).

Many words do NOT sound the way they look: one, two, eight, etc.

There are several reasons for this:

Some words used to be spelt as they sound, but the way we speak has changed.

Spelling reflects the pronunciation of only one particular area.

Regional accents vary, e.g. the Scots pronounce r in a word where people in southern England do not.

Words reflect the spelling or pronunciation of their origins:

bureau (French); psychiatry (Greek).

\* Make your own list of regional differences in pronunciation.

\* Using an etymological dictionary, find the origins of more words that are not spelt as they sound:

e.g. pneumatic, epoch, dinghy, yacht, ghoul.

# GET IT INTO YOUR HEAD

3

We need all the help we can with English spelling.  
There is no sure link between the way we say a word and the way we write it.

The sound of the same groups of letters may vary:

bus, busy, bush, abuse.

Words that look identical may be pronounced in different ways:

tear, row, bass, wind.

One sound may be written in several ways:

f / ff / ph / gh - five, off, phone, enough.

sh / su / ti / ci - shoe, sugar, nation, suspicion, etc.

\* Collect your own examples of similar inconsistencies.

The best way to learn to spell a word is:

LOOK    COVER        WRITE        CHECK

Do this until you are right every time.

Spelling does not have to be hard work. WORD GAMES help:  
hangman, wordsearches, crosswords and anagrams, etc.

Try these for starters, then make up other games yourself:

\* Make at least 50 words of 3 letters or more from SCARLET.

\* Turn one 4 letter word into another, changing one letter and making a new word each time:  
HOME to WORK in 4 moves: HOME - SOME - SORE - WORE - WORK.

Try changing from HEAD to FOOT,  
beat the ancient alchemists and turn LEAD into GOLD.

See who can complete the change in the fewest moves.  
Think of more contrasting words to change in the same way.

# THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

## 4

There are some basic phonetic patterns in English spelling.

VOWELS ~ AEIOU ~ can be pronounced with long or short sounds.

SHORT vowels sound like this:

pap pep pip pop pup.

A LONG vowel "says its name" (as when you recite the alphabet):

rail reel rile role rule

Adding a 'magic e' to a word with short vowel makes it long:

it makes a HAT a thing to HATE,  
turns a PIP into a PIPE,  
and from a KIT can make a KITE.

The magic e makes a COP able to COPE,  
when his PAL turns PALE.

It lets you leave the FAT boy to his FATE,  
while the THIN one becomes THINE.

\* Collect your own lists of these words.

\* Invent sentences and short stories to illustrate them.

Many long vowel sounds are written with two vowels together:

fair, feel, four, food.

Some are two sounds that slide into another (diphthongs):

sail, soil, sour, tour.

Clearly, this spelling is no longer phonetic.

We now have one pattern to represent three different sounds:

four, sour, tour.

One group of letters can even represent seven different sounds:

tough, though, cough, thought, drought, through, thorough.

\* How many pronunciations are there for slough?

\* Find more words with -ough. Match their sounds with those given.

# HARD LUCK

5

CONSONANTS, like vowels, can be pronounced in different ways.

Some, like k, give a HARD sound before a vowel:

kale, keel, kill, kosher, kung fu.

others, like m always have a SOFT one:

mat, met, mill, mob, mud.

Some consonants are hard or soft following different vowels:

c and sc are hard in front of a, o or u,

cat, cot, cut,

scab, scoff, scurf.

and soft before e or i,

cell, city,

scene, scissors.

To keep a hard sound, we may need to add another letter:

If we add e to hug, we get huge,

which has a soft sound for g.

To keep g hard, and a long vowel,

we add u: fug/ fugue .

\* Find more examples of words with gue or gui.

Some letters sound hard or soft depending on their origins:

choke, an old English word, starts with a soft sound;

chorus, which comes from Greek, starts with a hard sound.

\* Make a list of words where ch is hard or soft.

\* Do the same with g.

\* Look in an etymological dictionary to see if the pattern of hard and soft sounds is linked with the original languages from which the words come.

# I MUST COME FIRST

6

I before e  
except after c  
it sounds like me.

This is a useful spelling rule that works most of the time:

ie	cei
niece	ceiling
relieve	deceit
brief	receive
believe, etc	conceited, etc.

EXCEPTIONS are:

seize, weir, weird, protein, species.

When the sound is NOT like me (ee), then most words have ei:

leisure, their, reigns, eight, heir, vein, surfeit, etc.  
but some have ie:

friend, fiery, tried, etc.

Making up stories using these spelling patterns is a painless way to learn them:

My neighbours were grieving for their niece, who had been rather conceited and worried about her weight. When she received some species of foreign berries believed to be full of protein, she conceived some weird idea that, fried in pies, they would help her achieve slimness. She died shrieking.

\* Copy words from the story into two columns, those with ie and those with ei.

\* Make up silly stories of your own using similar words.

# ALL'S WELL

7

all, well, full, will, etc.

We often combine these with other words to make longer ones.  
When we do, the rule is that double -l l becomes single.

It may be before another:  
altogether, welfare.

Or after another:  
cheerful, until.

Sometimes two words with -l l are put together.  
In this case, both parts lose a letter:  
wilful, skilful, fulfil.

An EXCEPTION is a description using well.  
After the noun, we write it with two separate words:  
The team were well matched      The man was well off  
Before the noun, we write it joined by a hyphen:  
The well-matched teams      The well-off man

If someone or something is ill-done, then we always use a hyphen:  
They were ill-prepared      The ill-fated ship

In all these cases, we keep the -l l.

\* Explain why each word in italics has a single or a double l, and why hyphens are used or not:

Fred, was a *skilful* gardener. A *handful* of seeds would produce wonderful displays in his *well-planned* borders. A *cheerful* person, he almost always welcomed visitors - until a *well-heeled* couple, who were *well* dressed but *ill-bred*, let their *frightful* *ill-mannered* son make an awful mess of his plants.

\* Write a similar paragraph of your own.

# DOES IT ALL ADD UP?

8

Making words with prefixes and suffixes.

A prefix is a small word or group of letters added to the front of a word.

A suffix is added to the end of a word.

APART FROM prefixes and suffixes ending in -l l ( see page 7),  
when you add a prefix, DON'T add or subtract letters at the join:

dis + obey = disobey;	dis + appoint = disappoint
mis + apply = misapply	mis + employ = misemploy
un + able = unable	un + eaten = uneaten

The examples above have SINGLE letters at the join.

When the last letter of the prefix and the first letter of the main word are the same,  
you will have a DOUBLE letter:

dis + similar =dissimilar	mis + spell = misspell
un + natural =unnatural	over + rule = overrule

The same rule applies with suffixes:

open + ness = openness	keen + ness = keenness
real + ly = really	with + hold = withhold

\* Using your dictionary or thesaurus, find prefixes for the following words  
that will result in a DOUBLE letter at the join:  
legal, rational, mobile, nerve, numerate, solve, spend, satisfy.

\* Now find prefixes that will result in a SINGLE letter at the join:  
normal, large, estimate, agree, active, able, loyal.

# MORE LONG ODDS

When you add a suffix usually:

ONE consonant follows a LONG vowel;  
TWO consonants follow a SHORT vowel:

holy    holly    hoping    hopping  
duly    dully    later    latter  
writer    written    flute    flutter  
baker    backer    hake    hacker, etc.

\* Compile your own list of similar words.

Where you see TWO vowels together, if you add an ending you have only ONE consonant:

meet    meeting                      read    reader  
boat    boating                      shout    shouted

\* Pick out the long and short vowels in this tongue-twister:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper.

\* Read the following paragraph, then pick out and put into 3 columns:

1. Words with a long vowel followed by one consonant.
2. Two vowels together followed by one consonant.
3. A short vowel followed by two consonants.

The bonny lass stopped biting her nails as the bony bloke in the ragged hat shouted and grabbed the tiller; but the rotten boat was battered and beaten by the bitter fury of the raging storm.

\* Write a similar paragraph of your own.

\* Sort out your words in the same way.

# UNEASY ENDINGS

10

The letter e may be 'magic' when used to make long vowels from short, but needs special care if it comes before a suffix.

KEEP e before a suffix that starts with a consonant:

hope + less = hopeless      love + ly = lovely  
move + ment = movement      grace + ful + graceful

EXCEPTION: argument.

BUT TAKE OFF e before a suffix that starts with a vowel:

hope + ing = hoping      love + able = lovable  
move + able = movable      grace + ious = gracious

EXCEPTIONS

KEEP e in a word ending in -oe: canoeing, hoeing.

KEEP e when it is needed to keep a soft sound:

peaceable, knowledgeable, courageous.

\* Practise these examples:

add -able to each of following words:

change, excite, note, cure, manage, service.

add - ing :      dine, toe, argue, amuse.

add - ment:      move, argue, advertise.

\* Explain why some of the following words keep e and some don't:

exciting, excitement, canoeist, racist, noticeable,  
noticing, arguing, outrageous, vicious.

# WHY CHANGE?

11

The letter y usually changes to i before a suffix:

baby + s = babies	fly + er = flier
worry + ed = worried	lovely + ness = loveliness
easy + ly = easily	happy + est = happiest

But KEEP the y if the letter BEFORE it is a vowel:

chimney + s = chimneys	play + ed = played
buy + er = buyer	grey + er = greyer

EXCEPT some words in -ay which DO change to i:

lay - laid	say - said	pay - paid
day - daily	gay - gaily	

BUT NEVER CHANGE to i before -ing or -ish.

flying	laying	drying
envying	greyish	babyish

\* Try these for practice:

add -ness:	happy, lonely, grey, crazy.
add -ing:	cry, comply, buy, toy, try.
add -s or -es:	try, lady, guy, monkey, country.
add -er:	sorry, carry, employ, worry, happy.

\* Explain why some words keep y and some change to i:

allies / alleys	storeys / stories	applied / applying
buyer / drier	thirtyish / thirtieth	hurried / hurrying

\* Explain:

dying / dyeing	busyness / business
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# MORE IRREGULARITIES

12

To make a word plural we add s, or es after s, x, ch, sh:  
buses, sixes, riches, wishes.

Words ending in -a normally add s:  
photos, lilos, pianos, kilos, radios.

But some add es:  
tomatoes, potatoes, heroes. echoes.

\* Make your own lists of these words.

The other REGULAR pattern is when y changes to i:  
babies, stories, etc. (See page 11).

There are a number of IRREGULAR plurals.

Many are common words: men, women, children, feet, etc.

Most words ending in -fe or -f change to ves: lives, wives, knives, etc.

But those pronounced with an f sound just add s: roofs, chiefs.

Many technical words keep plurals from their Greek or Latin origins:

words in -us take -i: stimulus / stimuli.

in -um take -a: datum / data; strata.

in -on take -a: criterion / criteria; phenomena.

\* Find some more examples of words like this.

Words with hyphens usually put -s before the hyphen: passers-by,  
but those made from verbs put the -s at the end: lay-bys, take-offs, etc.

We tend to make words fit regular patterns. This can give a choice of endings:

appendixes / appendices aquariums / aquaria

mediums / media.

\* Check in your dictionary for the different usage of these plurals.

\* Can you find any more words with alternative endings?

Lastly, some words don't change at all: sheep, aircraft, etc.

It often helps to keep things in the family.

The spelling of one word can help us spell related words:

sign, resign, design, signature, assignment.

Here the hard g in signature can help us to remember the silent g in the other words.

The long i in finite can help spell the unstressed vowel sound in the rest:

finite, definite, infinity, infinitesimal

Or the hard c in critic and critical can help with the spelling of criticise and criticism.

The letter t is not pronounced in any of the following:

whistle, thistle, bristle, jostle, wrestle.

fasten, hasten, listen, glisten, soften.

itch, pitch, ditch, witch, twitch.

It helps to play around with such words:

The witch wrestled with the thistles  
in the pitch dark ditch  
as the softened glistening bristles  
on her chin began to itch.

My new acquaintance kept acquiring stray cats.  
When the court acquitted her of theft, I had to acquiesce.

Even such a know-all as you must acknowledge  
that some things are unknown and some unknowable.

\* Make your own lists of words with particular spelling patterns.

\* Invent rhymes or silly sentences to practise their spelling.

# SHH! SILENT LETTERS

14

Do doughnuts give you hiccoughs?  
Or perhaps donuts give you hiccups?

Many consonants are not pronounced as written, or even at all.

b in climb or subtle  
g in sign or foreign  
h in ghost or rhubarb  
gh in right or eight  
l in walk or could  
p in pneumonia or psalm  
w in wring or write

Some silent letters used to be pronounced.

The kn in words like knife and know were both pronounced in early English,  
(like King Canute - Cnut).

The same is true of words like gnaw and gnash.

\* List as many words as you can with silent initial consonants.  
Check in a dictionary to see how many you have missed.

Some silent letters were deliberately put in to make words look more like their  
Latin or Greek originals.

The b in debt, for instance,  
was to make it look more like the Latin debitum;  
we can see the links in meaning with debit.

Either letter can be silent in words with wh:

the wh in where, for example, is pronounced differently from that in who.

\* Write two lists of words spelt with wh:  
those where we pronounce the w and those where we pronounce the h.

\* Put in the missing silent letters to make sense of these:

The nit hose sit was failing had to resin his chair.

I was happy to sin wen they asked me.

The assistant rapped it for me and put a tit not in it.

# SOME STICKY ENDS

15

Many endings sound the same but look different.

Some are easy to separate:   ceed / cede / sede.

Only 3 words end with -ceed:  
Take heed; watch your speed  
to succeed on the road  
proceed with care.

Don't exceed the limit.

The rest end in -cede:   precede. intercede, accede, etc.  
EXCEPT - supersede.

Unstressed endings - ible /able and ance /ence - are stickier.

Links with words in the same family may help:

A word with a relative ending in -ation will end in -able:  
irritation - irritable   imagination - imaginable, etc.

Many words with endings in -ion have relatives in -ible:  
audition - audible   admission - admissible, etc.

These are not infallible:   if in doubt, use your dictionary.

SentENCES like the following may help you remember endings in -ence:

In my experience, the impudence of adolescents in the audience  
is a consequence of ebullience rather than absence of intelligence!

The substANCE of this may also help:

I was entranced by the dance performance,  
despite the nuisance of the disturbance near the entrance.

\* Write your own sentences of words which end in -ible and -able.

A knowledge of grammar can sort out some spelling problems.

In these words, the NOUN is spelt with c and the VERB with s:

advice / advise           device / devise           licence / license  
practice / practise   prophecy / prophesy

The lawyer advised me to take his advice.

\* Use the other pairs in sentences of your own.

# DOUBLE THE STRESS

16

Some words stress the first syllable: OPen, VISit

Some stress the last syllable: perFORM, deSCRIBE.

If you add a suffix beginning with a vowel (-ed, -ing, etc) to a word of one syllable,

ONE consonant follows a LONG vowel: pined

TWO consonants follow a SHORT VOWEL: pinned

This rule changes if you add to a word with TWO OR MORE SYLLABLES.

It depends where the STRESS comes in the word.

If the last syllable has a short vowel and is STRESSED, then DOUBLE the consonant:

omit - omitted      prefer - preferred      occur - occurred

If the last syllable is NOT stressed, DON'T double the consonant:

benefit - benefited      limit - limited      offer - offered

focus - focused      bias - biased      common - commoner

EXCEPT: words ending with -l. This is always doubled:

travel - travelled, cancel - cancelled.

\* Add -ing to following words:

transfer, quarrel, suffer, commit, wonder, confer.

\* Explain why only some of these have double consonants:

reference, referred, happening, beginning, targeting.

\* Write two paragraphs, as silly as you like:

one using as many words as you can with DOUBLE consonants,  
one with SINGLE letters only.

# COMMON CONFUSIONS

17

where to there  
wear two their  
we're too they're  
were

Some common words like these are often confused.

It can help to separate the words from each other and group them with related words or similar spellings:

If I wear these earrings, will they go with the rest of my gear?  
Where was it? I looked here, there and everywhere.  
They were all in the car, but two of them are missing.  
I've got your things, but ours have gone. Their stuff's gone too.  
We're going to be late. You're sure they're coming?

\* If you muddle such words, practise sentences like this until you get them right every time.

\* Explain the differences in the following highlighted words:

Always look all ways before crossing the road.

Aren't you all ready yet? It's already nine o'clock.

We've got ten seats altogether, but we won't be all together.

They won't allot us a lot of space for our bags.

\* Now use the words in sentences of your own.

## HOMOPHONES -

words that sound the same but are spelt differently - can cause problems.

As we've already seen, even spellchecks don't help if the words themselves are spelt correctly but used in the wrong context. But homophones can also be fun.

\* What alternative spellings do these jokes depend on?

Why are soldiers like nudists? Because they have bearskins.  
Why is a road map like a tree? Because it has lots of routes.  
Where did King Arthur's men go in the evenings? To the local knight club.  
How did the taxi driver make a fare living?  
Does a million dollars make a lot of sense?  
What cake gives you an electric shock? A current bun.

\* What similar jokes or puns can you come up with?

Riddles, rhymes and tongue-twisters can help us sort out and memorise easily confused words:

Whether the weather be cold,  
or whether the weather be hot,  
we'll weather the weather,  
whatever the weather,  
whether we like it or not!

\* Can you find or make up some more?

# BURIED TREASURE

19

If we dig into our dictionaries we can unearth clues to the past:

invasions and conquests,  
cultural changes,  
exploration and trade,

science and technology,  
interesting individuals - all have influenced our spelling.

The Vikings spoke Old Norse, which had many hard sounds.

They gave us words with sk or a hard sc: (scab, scare)  
while words with sh are Old English.

School is from Old English, with the spelling changed by Latin-speaking monks who copied medieval manuscripts.

The Vikings also used a hard g before e and i: get, give.

The soft g in ginger is from Old English,  
and in words like gentle is from French.

After 1066, French became our official language. Many native English words were spelt like French ones.

Words imported then have lost their original pronunciation, but have kept French spelling:  
beautiful, marquis, lieutenant, marriage.

French words 'borrowed' later have kept their pronunciation:  
gateau, ennui, ballet, chauffeur, fiancé / fiancée.

Food shows the influence of French and of other languages:  
e.g. gherkin from Dutch, and spaghetti from Italian.

\* How many other foreign words do we use for our food?

The renaissance brought us Greek and Latin words.

Later scientific terminology also came from classical languages:  
photography, psychology, chrysalis, rhesus.

\* Use an etymological dictionary to find the languages from which we have taken these words:

brogue, banshee, ghoul, dinghy, yacht, khaki.

\* Which people have given their names to: fuchsia, lynch, pasteurise?

# SPELLING REFORM?

20

George Bernard Shaw was one famous writer who wanted to reform our spelling. Here is an example he gave of our crazy system:

What does GHOTI spell? Answer : FISH.

GH = F as in couGH    O = I as in women    TI = SH as in staTion.

\* Make up similar examples of your own.

In 1959 an initial teaching alphabet was invented to help children learning to read - books were written in phonetic spelling.

\* Why do you think this experiment was abandoned?

US spelling is simpler and more phonetic than ours:

-our = -or:        color, odor, honor, etc.

-ise = -ize:        harmonize, advertise, etc.

-ough = u or o:    thru. plow.

\* Find other differences between American and British spellings.

Advertisements, tradenames and slang usage often simplify spellings:

drinka pinta milka day    lite / nite / foto / fella.

\* Why? Can you think of other examples?

Some arguments against spelling reform are:

phonetic spelling doesn't work if pronunciation differs:

bath sounds different in Bolton and in Brighton.

It would be harder to read books written in the past:

(Dickens, or even Dick Francis, would be as difficult as Chaucer).

We would lose links between words that help with meanings:

suicide, inside and insecticide would end in the same way.

\* Can you add to arguments for and against spelling reform?

