

Spelling Lists

For many years the teaching of spelling focused on providing students with spelling lists to learn by rote. This method works for some students but not for others. It also presumes that learning to spell correctly simply involves storing every word in visual memory – for most people this is an inadequate strategy. It is certainly quicker to spell words by accurately retrieving their images from print memory, but not everyone finds this easy to do, and we also have to tackle spelling words we have not seen before. Repeated exposure to visual images of words, and practice committing the sequence of letters to memory are good strategies for building stores of words that can be retrieved and spelled from memory. If students are to be given weekly lists of words to commit to sight word memory we need to think about the words we give them and the methods they use to commit them to memory.

Choosing words for weekly spelling lists

The words students learn are more easily remembered if they have a connection with each other. There are about 300 words that make up about 75% of the words students use in their writing, so it makes sense to ensure these words are able to be written ‘by sight’. If the words chosen for learning are grouped together by their frequency (Essential list 1, 2 etc.) they have no connection with each other. This is fine for the students who readily commit visual images of words to print memory, but it is not useful for those who don’t. It is better to provide word lists with some kind of connection. You can still use the 300 high-frequency words, but group them differently. You can also include other useful words in your lists if they have some kind of connection, because this will make them more memorable.

1. Group words with a common sound and spelling pattern

For example:

what	when	where	which	while	why
came	made	name	take	make	
head	read	ready	instead		
light	right	night	tight	fight	sight

2. Group words with a common sound but different spelling patterns

Choose two or more patterns at a time, according to the student’s needs

For example:

like	time	five	inside
find	kind	child	wild
light	right	sight	tight
my	cry	fly	defy
idea	item	island	idle

3. Group words that sound the same but look different (homophones) – for older students

These words can be very confusing for students so it is a good idea to use some of the well-known mnemonics to help them remember the different spellings, or to ask students to make up their own mnemonics.

For example:

principal	principle	(The principal is my pal)
where	wear	(where is a question word – uses a wh, like why, when which etc.)
I’ll	aisle	(I’ll walk down the aisle)
practice	practise	(Ice is a noun – like practice; practise is a verb)
advice	advise	(Ice is a noun – like advice; advise is a verb)

There are many websites with good ideas for mnemonics – students could find their own by typing in ‘mnemonics for spelling’ into a search engine.

4. Group words by spelling patterns – this suits spellers who find visualising words easy but is not so helpful for those who don't.

For example: great steak break
 leaf team dream lead read
 head dread instead breath feather

5. Group words that share a common morpheme

For example: artist florist motorist chemist
 teacher baker painter writer
 actor author doctor sculptor
 scholar vicar beggar pedlar

 thinnest oddest
 greatest kindest fastest
 wisest widest hugest
 funniest brainiest craziest

Organising spelling lists in this way provides students with opportunities to develop their knowledge of the structure of words and of the spelling system that underpins written English. If the words selected contain spelling patterns and rules that students do not understand, this will lead to frustration, but if they contain patterns and rules that are already known, this will provide no challenge for new learning to occur. You can use the same overall topic (spelling pattern, sound or morpheme) and select different words to suit the needs of different groups of students. *Switch on to Spelling* has suggested word lists at the end of each teaching topic. In Stage 1 the words selected are high-frequency words, in Stage 2 they are useful words for writing and in Stage 3 they are words for extending students' vocabularies. The *Spelling Under Scrutiny* dictionary (*The English Spelling Dictionary*) has a mixture of high-frequency words, useful words for writing and academic words all grouped around a common sound, to develop students' vocabulary knowledge, spelling skills and knowledge of the alphabetic code.

Strategies for committing words to memory

Look; cover; write; check

Look at the whole word, cover it, write it down from memory and check

(for students who find it easy to remember what the word looks like — a strong visual strategy)

Say, recite, cover; say, recite, write; check

Say the word as you look at it (because), break it into syllables (be/cause), recite each letter aloud (b-e/c-a-u-s-e), cover it, say the word, syllabify it and say each letter again, write it from memory saying each letter aloud, check

(for students who favour working with the sound of the word to help them remember what it looks like)

Look and copy; cover and write; check; repeat

Look at the word and copy it (maybe more than once), cover the word and write from memory, check and repeat

(for students who favour working with what the word feels like to write, to help them remember what it looks like)

Use Elkonin boxes to write words *sound by sound*

Students who cannot easily remember what whole words look like but who can spell words accurately sound by sound, may find writing words in Elkonin boxes helpful. They could highlight the hard-to-spell sounds in some way — colour the letters, colour-in the box, make the letters large so that they are more memorable.

aw	f	u	l
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Group words for the week by sound or spelling pattern

Students who learn best from sound to spelling pattern should be given spelling words that contain a common sound. They should highlight (and possibly use the Elkonin box technique) the common sound in each word, e.g. **pray**, **play**, **obey**, **they**, **came**, **make**, **pain**, **train**, **great**, **break**

Students who remember best what words look like, could have lists of words with a common spelling pattern and write the words according to the sounds the spelling pattern writes, e.g. **shower**, **flower**, **power**, **show**, **know**, **blow**, **window**

There is more information in *Spelling Under Scrutiny* about the schwa vowel sound on pages 94 and between pages 262 and 264.