

Spelling and Students with Learning Disabilities

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Students with learning disabilities in reading usually have problems in spelling as well. Spelling can be especially difficult for these students, for several reasons. First, the core deficit in reading disability (RD) typically involves word decoding, and many of the same weaknesses that impact word decoding in individuals with RD---such as poor phonemic awareness or poor knowledge of letter-sound relationships---also influence spelling. Furthermore, spelling is affected by independent reading and exposure to text; avid readers see more words in print and have more opportunities to learn spellings of specific words. Because individuals with RD are rarely avid readers, lack of exposure to printed words may adversely influence their spelling. Finally, English spelling is complex, drawing upon several different kinds of knowledge. Effective teaching of this knowledge is especially crucial for students with RD.

Spelling difficulties can be enduring in individuals with RD, sometimes even after reading has been successfully remediated. Addressing spelling difficulties is important, because poor spelling can hamper writing and can convey a negative impression even when the content of the writing is excellent.

Knowledge Required for Spelling in English

The most basic kind of knowledge required for good English spelling involves phonics knowledge, or knowledge of common letter-sound relationships. For example, children need to learn that the sound they hear at the beginning of the spoken word "bag" is spelled with the letter b, the medial sound is spelled with the letter a, and the final sound is spelled with the letter g. Unfortunately, however, basic phonics knowledge is necessary, but often not sufficient, for accurate spelling in English. Some familiarity with the printed word is essential for correct spelling of many words. This is true not only for phonetically irregular words such as *of* or *what*, but for many regular words as well. For instance, phonics knowledge serves as an essential base for spelling a word such as *shirt*, but the only way to know that the word is not spelled with *ur* (*shurt*) or *er* (*shert*) is to be familiar with the printed word. Morphological knowledge about root words and relationships among words is also important, especially as children progress to more advanced levels of reading and spelling. For example, the second vowel sound in the word *colonist* is a schwa (unstressed) vowel; it is impossible to hear that the vowel is an *o* rather than, say, an *i* or a *u*. However, if the child knows the spelling of the root word *colony*, this knowledge facilitates the spelling of the related word *colonist* (as well as *colonial* and *colonize*). All three kinds of knowledge---basic phonics knowledge, word-specific knowledge, and morphological knowledge---need to be addressed in spelling instruction.

Suggestions for Teaching Spelling to Students with LD

Provide systematic phonics instruction that incorporates teaching of phonemic awareness. Although this kind of instruction alone will not be enough to make students flawless spellers, phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge form an essential base for accurate spelling in English.

Teach common irregular words from the earliest stages of spelling. It is virtually impossible to generate a complete sentence without common irregular words such as *of*, *what*, and *were*. Therefore, it is important to begin teaching these kinds of words early, as one part of a more comprehensive spelling program. Multisensory techniques involving repeated tracing and saying of words can be especially helpful for introducing irregular words.

Teach useful spelling rules. Although many English words do not conform to consistent rules, some generalizations are very helpful to students, such as rules for adding endings to words with a silent *e* (*make*, *making*) or to closed syllables that end in a single consonant (*sit*, *sitting*).

Teach spelling of important grade-appropriate words. Because many English words cannot be spelled solely through the use of rules or phonics knowledge, spelling instruction also should include studying a corpus of important words needed for accurate spelling at each grade level.

Emphasize activities that involve writing or building printed words with letter tiles, not oral spelling. Oral spelling activities, such as traditional spelling bees, usually are not as effective as activities that require children to look carefully at the printed word.

Encourage students to use knowledge about root words and relationships among words to help them spell new words. Even when they possess this kind of knowledge, students will not always apply it spontaneously. It is very helpful to point out relationships among words and to illustrate how knowing the spelling of one word facilitates spelling of related words, as in the colony-colonist example.

Encourage independent reading to increase exposure to printed words. Independent reading cannot substitute for direct spelling instruction, but it can help to promote spelling knowledge---and of course, it is valuable for many other reasons as well.

Teach older children how to use a computer spell-checker. Like independent reading, spell-checkers are not a substitute for explicit spelling instruction from a knowledgeable teacher. Also, children need some phonics knowledge in order to use spell-checkers effectively. Nevertheless, spell-checkers can be enormously helpful to struggling spellers and writers, especially in the later grades when the volume of writing increases greatly.

Examples of Sources

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Five Guidelines for Learning to Spell and Six Ways to Practice Spelling

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Five Guidelines for Learning to Spell

Practice makes permanent. Did somebody tell you practice made perfect? That's only if you're practicing it right. Each time you spell a word wrong, you're 'practicing' the wrong spelling. So, if you're not sure how to spell the word, find out, *then* practice that spelling. **Keep an ongoing notebook** of words, so you've got your own personal dictionary and you can see your progress. Start small, though!!!

2. **Don't try to learn all the words at once.** Even if you learn them all in one sitting, practice them a few at a time. Find out what works best for you -- it may be one or two words or as many as three or four. Then, add another word to your list, or start on different ones. Each time you learn another word, go back and practice the ones you learned before it, because, after all, practice makes permanent.

3. **Review the words you know.** If you already know some of the words on your list, practice them once or twice each before you start tackling the ones you don't know yet. It's a good confidence booster (and besides, practice makes permanent!).

4. **Practice spelling as if you expect to spell those words right when you're writing.** There's more to learning to spell than passing a spelling test. There are lots of ways to get from guessing to knowing what to write down on a test, AND spelling words right when you're writing sentences and paragraphs. You want to train your hands to write the correct letters in the right order when you think a certain word. Use the "six ways to practice spelling" listed here.

5. **Use the words you've practiced.** That's the point to learning them, anyway. Have a list of words you're learning handy, in a notebook, and you can look them up to make sure you're spelling them right. Besides, using them is practicing them, and practice...

Six Different Ways to Practice Spelling

1. "Trace, Copy and Recall"

Make a chart like this with 3 or four spelling words you want to learn:

TRACE	COPY	RECALL
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Then fold over the "recall" part so that only the first two columns show:

Trace	Copy	Recall
word		

Then

1. Say the word to yourself.
2. Trace it in the first column, saying the letters as you trace, and say the word again. You might put a little rhythm into it. ("WORD . W - pause - O - pause R-D - WORD!).
3. Go to the second column, say the word, and write it the same way.
4. Then, while the rhythm and the sound and the feeling are fresh in your mind, flip the paper over and say the word and spell it out -- the same way, saying each letter (because, after all, practice makes permanent).
5. If it's a hard word, put it on the list more than once. If you're feeling particularly smart, trace and copy TWO words, and try to remember them both before you flip the page over. However, if your short-term memory isn't big enough to hold all that, do one at a time because you want to practice the words RIGHT, not make guesses!
6. After you've done all the words this way a few times, start doing them two or three at a time, and when you feel like you know them, do the list again -- but skip the tracing, or, when you're feeling VERY confident, skip the tracing and the copying both.

2. Reverse chaining by letter

1. Say the word. Then write it out, saying each letter (see number one about putting rhythm into it).

W - O - R - D

2. Skip a line and say it and write it again -- minus the last letter. Say the last letter, but don't write it.

W - O - R - ____

3. Skip a line and say it and write it again -- minus the last two letters. Say them, but don't write them.

W - O - ____ ____

4. Do that until you're only writing one letter.

5. Go back to the top. Read the word, then spell it out loud.

6. Fold the page over so you can't see the whole word. Say the word, spell it, and add that last letter.

7. Fold the page back again. Say the word, spell it, and add the last two letters.

8. Keep going until you spell the whole word.

9. GO BACK AND CHECK -- make sure you didn't leave out a letter!

3. Reverse chaining by syllable (this is harder, for longer words)

1. Say the word, then write it out, saying each letter (see number one about putting rhythm into it).

S-E-P-A-R-A-T-E

2. Skip a line and say it and write it again -- minus the last syllable. Say the last syllable and spell it out loud, but don't write it.

S-E-P-A-_____

3. Continue until you aren't writing anything -- but still say the spelling out loud.
4. Go back to the top. Read the word, then spell it out loud.
5. Fold the page over so you can't see the whole word. Say the word, spell it, and add the last syllable.
6. Fold the page back again. Say the word, spell it, and add the last two syllables.
7. Continue until you spell the whole word.
8. GO BACK AND CHECK -- make sure you didn't leave out any letters!

4. Highlighting the hard parts:

Some words, like separate, are only hard in some parts. You might be getting these correct on a test -- but always spelling them **WRONG** when you write, frustrating you and your teachers to no end. And since practice makes permanent, every time you practice it wrong you're making it more likely you'll write it wrong the next time. Here's something to help you focus on the troublesome part.

This is also very good for learning rules and patterns. If you want to learn a bunch of IE words -- that "I before E" rule that so many people find so hard to use -- this is a good way to do it.

Get different color pens or pencils or markers, and index cards. Write the words vividly, boldly on the cards -- and make the 'hard part' a different color than the rest... maybe with stripes on the letters. Make a mental picture of that card, read the word aloud and spell it aloud, and change the way you **say** the "hard part," maybe saying it louder, maybe putting on a British accent. So, you'd write

sep**A**rate

bel**ie**ve

rel**ie**ve

gri**ie**ve

ach**ie**ve

When you write the whole word, think about the hard part, what it looks like or sounds like. So, while you're writing "separate," you might be thinking "sep AY rate" and/or that bold, red A.

Again, the keys here are to NOT overwhelm your brain -- don't try to learn 5 words at a time like this unless you've got an amazing visual memory. Better to do one word 5 times -- and start spelling it right in your writing.

5. Use a Tape Recorder to test yourself, and to practice using them.

Read the words -- be sure you're pronouncing them right -- into a tape recorder. Record it like it's a spelling test -- word, example sentence, word. (For example, you'd say " Separate. Put the papers in separate piles. Separate.")

6. Practice using the words in short phrases.

If separate is the word, see if you can think of 5 *different* phrases with the word and write them out. Let's see... separa^grate rooms, separa^rate cars, separa^arate houses, A Separ^ate Peace... Or, try to use 20 of your words in the same story. You can get pretty silly!