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ABSTRACT

One of a series dealing with current issues affecting language arts instruction, this paper focuses on spelling. The paper begins with the observation that when people complain that students cannot write, too often they mean that when the students do write, they misspell a few words. After noting that spelling improvement comes from using words in context, the paper explains that much of the confusion in the English spelling system can be accounted for in the history of the English language. Taking the classroom into consideration, the paper emphasizes that the most important thing about spelling is that it is something writers use. It also cautions that worrying about correct spelling may prevent writers from producing anything worthwhile. The paper concludes with suggested guidelines for spelling improvement. (HOD)

January 1984

STARTER SHEET

SLATE Support for the Learning and Teaching of English

SPELLING, REVISITED

(*Note:* In October 1976 SLATE published the first Starter Sheet on this topic. Even after several printings, the supply of copies of that Starter Sheet has been exhausted. However, the issue of spelling has not subsided during the intervening seven years. In the remarks that follow, the author of that first statement, Elisabeth McPherson, expands her treatment of the topic and updates the list of suggested resources.)

The importance of spelling, as an indicator of whether or not the schools are "really educating" their students, has been greatly exaggerated. When people complain that today's students can't write, too often they mean that when the students do write, they misspell a few words. "Can't write," for these critics, has little to do with saying something worthwhile, with organizing material, with developing ideas or expressing feelings. Rather, for these critics (and some of them are teachers), evaluating a piece of writing means searching for mechanical errors, and prominent among these errors is spelling. Misspelled words are easy to spot and easy to verify. It's a little harder to be absolute about other mechanical problems; authorities sometimes disagree about the placement of commas or the use of capitals. And it's a lot riskier to be dogmatic about clarity or coherence or creativity. The safe and easy way has always been to pounce on the misspelled words.

The result of all this zeal has been to inhibit writing. Halfway through a sentence, too many students stop to brood about spelling–does "written" have one or two *t*s?–and the interrupted idea is lost. These students can't write well because they concentrate too soon on the details of editing. They are convinced, often with justification, that their teachers or the college entrance boards or members of the public somewhere out there care more about correctness than about content.

None of this means that people don't need to learn to spell. Of course they do. But it does mean that an overemphasis on the importance of spelling can be damaging to writing's real purpose, using written words to get something said.

Some Facts about Spelling

The ability to spell correctly has no intrinsic value. Aside from a few pastimes, such as playing Scrabble or working crossword puzzles, and a few specialized jobs, such as editing what someone else has written, spelling is useful only when people actually sit down to write. Then, hit or miss, they have to spell, but nobody has shown that memorizing lists of isolated words has much to do with producing those same words in sentences. Or that spending time on "One Hundred Words Most Frequently Misspelled" accomplishes anything except to make writers more self-conscious and more uneasy. Or that performing in spelling bees does any more than give naturally good spellers a chance to show off. Just as writing improvement comes from practice in writing, and reading improvement from practice in reading, so spelling improvement comes from using words in context.

It may help to know what spelling is and how it developed. Spelling is a system of using symbols – the letters of the alphabet – to represent the sounds of speech. In some languages the correspondence between the speech sounds and the written symbols is fairly exact. For each speech sound there is a single letter, and that letter always stands for the same sound and no other. Such a desirable state of affairs does not, however, exist in modern English.

Our alphabet doesn't correspond very well to the sounds we make when we talk. Americans use about forty-three different speech sounds, depending on where they grew up, but we have only twenty-six letters in our alphabet. Of those twenty-six, three consonants are unnecessary. The sounds represented by *c* can be replaced, and often are, by *k* or *s*: *cat, kitty*; *city, silly*. The sounds represented by *qu* might be more accurately represented by *kw* (quite), and the sounds represented by *x* more accurately by *ks* (*tax, tacks*). On the other hand, we have four very common consonant sounds that can't be represented by any single letter: the two sounds heard in *with* and *wither* and the sounds heard in *shut* and *church*. To further complicate the situation, the sound usually represented by *sh* is sometimes indicated by *s* alone (*sure* and *sugar*). When we come to vowel sounds, the situation is even more random. In speech, most dialects use about twenty-one vowel sounds; yet our alphabet has only five vowel letters, or seven if we count the semi-vowels, *y* and *w*.

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When speakers of other languages say that English is hard to learn, they don't mean that speaking it is difficult, they mean that the spelling system seems irrational. Why do we have *write* and *right* and *rite* when we say them all the same? Why do we spell *through* and *though* and *thought* and *cough* with the same *ough* combination when we say them all differently? It was this state of things that led to Shaw's famous remark that *ghoti* spells *fish*. *gh* as in *laugh*, *o* as in *women*, *ti* as in *ambition*.

The history of how the English language developed accounts for much of this confusion. English was first written by scholars trained in Latin using the Latin alphabet, but the sounds of Latin are not the same as the sounds of English. When thousands of words from Latin and Greek were added during the Renaissance, spellings from those languages came too. English has always been a borrowing language, and for the last few centuries, borrowed words have meant borrowed spellings. The richer the English vocabulary became, the more the spelling confusion grew.

But the invention of printing in the late fifteenth century is responsible for most of the problem with ordinary words. Four hundred years ago, the way English was spoken sounded quite different from the way we speak it today. Some speakers still made the sounds represented by the final *e* in words like *late* and the *gh* in words like *night*, so printers included the symbols for those sounds in their spelling. Then printers discovered that their lives would be much easier if the same words were always spelled the same way, so they standardized the system. Until that time, misspelling words was not considered a material offense. Quite reputable writers spelled words first one way, then another, often in the same piece of writing. Standardized spelling changed all that, and modern writers are struck with an arbitrary, outdated system invented four hundred years ago.

It's reasonable to ask, "Well, if the system is so bad, why don't we change it?" The answer is that many people have tried, and nobody has succeeded. From Mulcaster in 1582 to Noah Webster, the dictionary maker, Isaac Pitman, the inventor of shorthand, William Dean Howells, the novelist, Andrew Carnegie, the financier, and George Bernard Shaw, the dramatist - to mention only a few well known names - people have written books, organized societies, and given money for a single purpose: to reform the spelling system. All this activity has resulted in only a few minor changes: the dropping of the *u* from such words as *color*, for instance, and the change from *re* to *er* in such words as *theater*. Even those changes have occurred only in America, not in Great Britain.

If the spelling system changes at all, the change will come slowly. Some of the reasons for this conservatism are good, some less good. People who have learned the present system, or most of it, are emotionally attached to the old ways. Such simplified spellings as *nite* or *thru* look wrong to them. If they don't quite believe that God ordained how English should be spelled, at least they feel there is a genuinely "right way" to spell words and that spelling them any other way is a certain sign that the language is being ruined. When Shaw left his fortune for improving English spelling, the British courts declared the will invalid.

But there are some sensible reasons for objecting to a change. Libraries would become out-of-date or as hard to read as Chaucerian English, and a spelling system beautifully adapted to one dialect of English - the way they talk in Boston, perhaps would be a poor fit with the way English is spoken in Brooklyn or Baton Rouge or Bombay.

Even though now, and probably for a long time in the future, we have to live with an archaic system, some bits of comfort exist. For one thing, speakers of all English dialects have to make about the same number of adjustments as they learn to spell, since the system doesn't accurately reflect what any of them say. For another, the majority of English words *are* phonetic, that is, there is a more or less regular correspondence between the sounds and the letters that represent them. The trouble comes mainly with common words and homonyms. *know, doubt, phone, to, too, two,* and *there, their, they're,* for example. If much of the system were not phonetic, learning to read would be impossible, or as difficult as it is in classical Chinese, where thousands of characters represent entire words or parts of words.

The result is that all English-speaking children who can read anything already know a good deal about English spelling. To read at all, they must decode - translate the spelling system other writers have used into words with which they are familiar. The more they read, the more conventional spellings become imprinted in their memories. Constant readers are likely to be good spellers. In fact, there is considerable reason to think that most spelling is learned, not from practicing in workbooks and memorizing rules, but from seeing words in use, over and over again.

Not all proficient, or even omnivorous, readers are secure spellers, however. Apparently some people have strong visual memories. They can "see" the way a word ought to look and automatically reproduce it. These are the people who, when they are asked how to spell a word out of context, often say, "Wait a minute. Let me write it down." For people with less accurate visual memories, one way usually looks as good as another. These are the people who need to keep a dictionary handy.

The cry, "But they can't spell!" often means quite different things. If "can't spell," as applied to an eighteen-year-old, means not knowing the difference between *what* and *were*, the problem is real, but it's more likely to mean a reading impairment than a spelling difficulty. Marking "SP!" again and again won't be much help. On the other hand, if "can't spell" means uncertainty about *broccoli* or *embarrass*, the problem is trivial, the student needs to look it up, like most of the rest of us.

Teaching students how and when to use a dictionary is one of the essentials of good English instruction. But the "when" is important. Very little research has been done, except in the primary grades, on how people learn to spell, but a great deal has been discovered about how people learn to read and write, especially about how they learn to compose. At all levels, from kindergarten to college, emphasis has shifted from writing as product to writing as process. Effective English teachers are less concerned with marking mistakes and assigning grades on a finished piece of writing, more concerned with helping students find ideas, put those ideas into words, evaluate what they have written, revise it, and come up with something worth reading. This emphasis on process means that "cleaning it up" is always a last step. Students are told that, in the final copy, conventional spelling makes writing easier for readers, so that they will be neither distracted nor turned off by what looks like a mistake.

In the early elementary grades, this emphasis on process means encouraging children to use invented spelling and praising what they have achieved. There is no evidence that the acceptance of invented spelling establishes or reinforces habits that will persist or be hard to break. As the children's language abilities mature, so does their spelling. The difference is that children allowed to take risks with writing are more comfortable when they write, less self-conscious about "getting it wrong."

In high school and college, this emphasis on process means that the conventions of writing punctuation, syntax, usage,

and especially spelling—are regarded as matters for editing rather than composing. Some students need a lot of reassurance. Too many of them have been convinced that they can't write because their earlier efforts have been red-marked, and often failed, not for what they said but for how they spelled it. "Five misspelled words mean an automatic F" has not disappeared from many composition classes.

Finally, then, the most important thing about spelling is that it's something writers *use*. Until writers need to use it, spelling has no value. Worrying about correct spelling as they write can prevent writers from producing anything worthwhile. Failure to produce anything they consider worthwhile can keep them from caring how it looks, from bothering to find what may simply be careless misspelling and change it to something more acceptable.

What to Do about It

- Read what students have written for content rather than mere correctness. When students are satisfied with the final draft, and only then, give them the guidance they need on spelling.
- Refrain from the false advice that pronouncing words correctly will help in spelling them. Such advice may work for *library*, where pronouncing the first *r* is a reminder to put it in, but the advice won't work for such words as *often* or *interesting*, where it only leads to unnatural pronunciation.
- Remind students that a few spelling rules actually do work: when to double consonants or drop final *e*'s, for instance (*hopping* and *hoping*).
- Help students remember the old tricks for distinguishing troublesome pairs (a principal is supposed to be a *pal*) and encourage them to devise their own tricks for their own problems.
- Teach students how and when to use a dictionary and tell them honestly that you often need to use it yourself. Let them see you doing it.
- Discuss the oddities of the spelling system. Talk about how the system got the way it is. Sometimes knowing where words came from can help in remembering how they are spelled. Most *ph* and *ps* words (*phonetics* and *psychology*) came from Greek, for example, and most prefixes came from Latin prepositions.
- Reward good spelling, but don't over-reward it or over-penalize mistakes. Treat conventional spelling as a courtesy to readers, not as a matter of life and death.
- Explain honestly the public prejudices about spelling. Tell older students that even though it seems silly, judgments will be made about their intelligence and their general abilities based on how they spell.
- Remember that the self-appointed guardians of the language don't share your understading of how people learn to write and to spell. Remember that you'll have to explain what you do and why, probably over and over, to parents, to colleagues in other disciplines, to that excited letters-to-the-editor part of the public.
- And cheer yourself up with an ironic reversal. Not too long ago, it was fashionable to say that persnickety school ma'ams were passionately devoted to spelling and ordinary people didn't care much about it. Now the public, or some of it, is wailing about illiteracy, while good language arts teachers are using a better definition of literacy. the ability to read with pleasure and understanding, and the ability to write something real. Spelling enters into those abilities, but it isn't the most important part.

Elisabeth McPherson

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