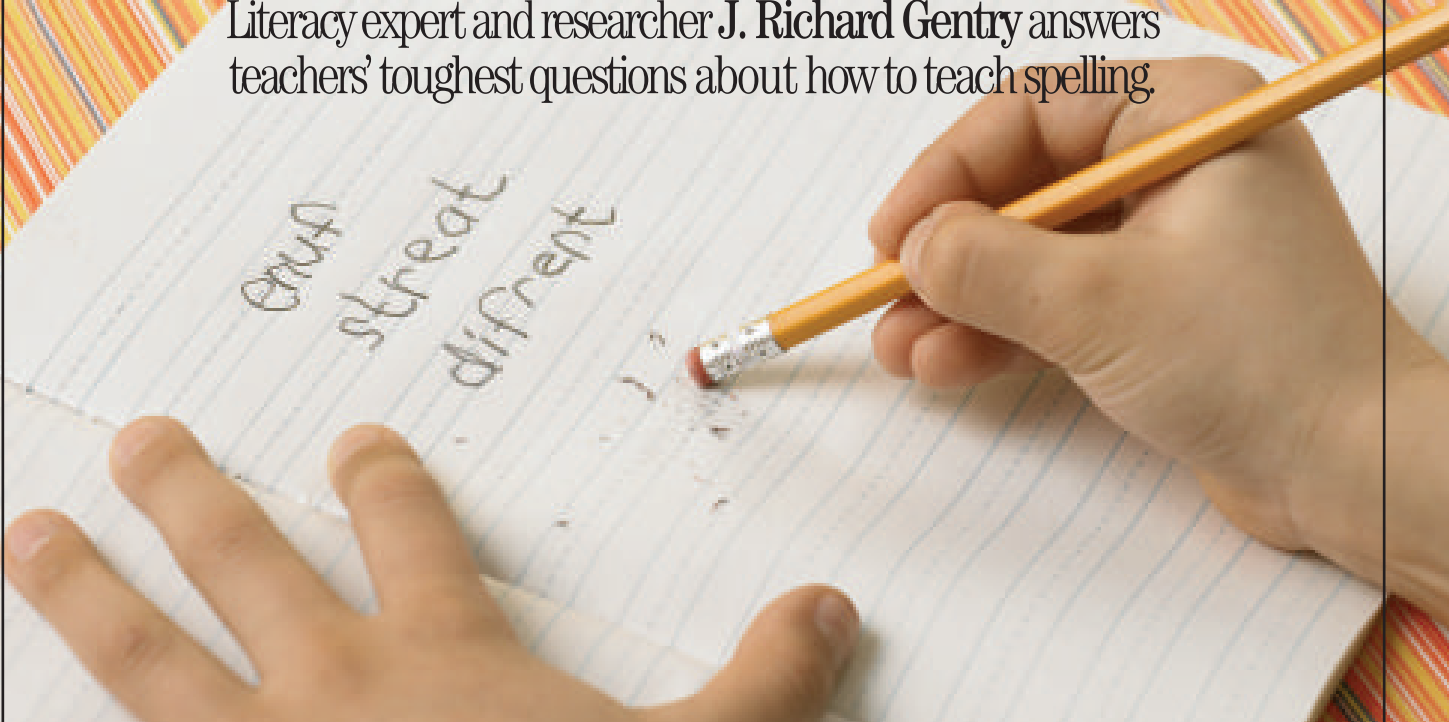


Literacy expert and researcher J. Richard Gentry answers teachers' toughest questions about how to teach spelling.



Recently, a teacher came to me and shared her frustrations. Her principal was refusing even to consider her and her colleague's request to adopt much-needed research-based spelling books. "After all, everyone has computers," the principal had said. "We don't need to worry much about spelling anymore."

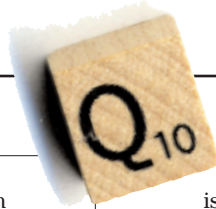
Yes, we do! As teachers, we *know* that. Spelling is the study of word-specific knowledge, and knowledge about words is important. Today, many fourth through eighth graders can't write with fluency because they don't have automatic access to basic words and spelling patterns. Yet, sadly, many teachers have had little support in this area. Luckily, evidence-based spelling instruction is coming back, and it's a good thing. The new generation of evidence-based spelling books deserves careful consideration. Here are

some of the questions I hear most often from teachers, and, I hope, some insights that will help.

Q. *How do children first learn to spell?*

In preschool through the beginning of second grade, kids go through four phases of invented spelling, from using random letters, to beginning and ending sounds, to a letter for each sound, to chunking. As young children break the code, we see their invented spelling of a word like *united* (as in United States) go through the phases and change over time—from random letters to UND to UNITD to a chunking spelling such as YOUNIGHTED—before the correct spelling is stabilized. These phases of invented spelling give an idea of the child's strategic operations. We see them moving from non-alphabetic operations >>

best practice



to operations with partial phonemic awareness, to operations with full phonemic awareness and, finally, engaging in operations that demonstrate their ability to use chunks of phonics patterns.

Q. *How is spelling important for reading fluency?*

Spelling is directly connected to reading

and writing proficiency. The fourth grader who knows that *hole* differs from whole and who would not spell it as H-O-A-L even though that spelling is analogous to C-O-A-L is free to write thoughts from her imagination without interrupting the flow. The eighth grader who knows the spelling pattern *circum-*, the Latin meaning based prefix meaning “around,”

is much more likely to attach meaning to the words *circumnavigate* and *circumspect*, when first encountering them as a reader.

Q. *How should I answer parents, or even administrators, who think computers have made spelling unnecessary?*

The real “computer” for spelling is in the writer or reader’s brain. Neuroscientists studying dyslexics, notoriously poor spellers, suggest that there is actually a neurological basis for spelling. That’s important, because it means that the writer or reader who can store knowledge of correct spelling and activate areas for automatic recognition of spelling can focus on ideas when writing, instead of focusing on the spelling of words.

Q. *What does good spelling instruction look like?*

When I walk into a classroom and the teacher has a research-based curriculum of word study, and she is conducting a teacher-led word sort to help children understand a pattern or important spelling principle, that is spelling instruction that works.

Q. *How should I introduce word sorting to my students?*

Word sorting is an instructional technique based on systematic study of spelling patterns. Start by leading your students in a sort to introduce a spelling pattern or concept. Make sure students understand the how the sort works, then have students sort individually and write the words they have sorted in a column in their word-study notebooks. This kind of practice helps students recognize the probability that words are spelled one way and not another—long *a* at the end of a word is likely *-ay* as in *day*, *say* and *play* but not so often *-ey* as in *they*. Continue sorting with buddy sorts and speed sorts to help the students move to automaticity.

Q. *My third graders reading levels are all over the map. Should I be differentiating my spelling lists?*

Spelling instruction should always be dif-

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differentiated. A good third-grade spelling program will follow a curriculum of word study for weekly units that include important words and patterns for third-grade writers. But the list should include words of the same pattern or principle that are above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level for differentiation.

Q. Should I give up spelling tests altogether?

Sometimes, schools advocate banning the spelling test in an effort to move away from the old assign-and-test method of teaching spelling. They want to see the teaching of words and spelling patterns—not just assigning and testing.

But giving up spelling tests may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Spelling tests in the pre-test and post-test format are research-based and quite useful.

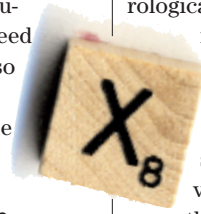
Q. How should I use pre-tests?

Use the pre-test to help differentiate

instruction and help you decide how much to focus on a particular unit of study, pattern, or concept. The pre-test will help you know which students need the most help. It will help the students determine which words need their focus. The pre-test may also help you decide whether a student's list for the week should be on, above, or below grade level.

Q. I try to teach grammar in context. Can I teach spelling in context as well?

It's always important to connect spelling to writing. One way to make that connection is to have children proofread their current writing for the particular spelling pattern or principle they are focusing on in a weekly unit. For example, once fifth graders study the *ie-ei* rule, hold them responsible for proofreading their current writing for *ie-ei* words. The *ie-ei* proofreading might continue for four weeks. Then move on to a new pattern.



Q. Several of my students have dyslexia. How should I modify my lessons for them?

Students with dyslexia often have a neurologically based spelling disability. They need extra support and empathy.

Often they are very bright. Become the student's editor and provide more support for spelling than you normally provide. Don't let dyslexics think that they can't spell because they are lazy. Tell them that their spelling looks like Albert Einstein's fifth-grade spelling. He was dyslexic too.

The best thing you can do as a teacher for *all* your students is to adopt research based spelling instructional practices. They'll help you ensure your students are learning most the important words and patterns at the right time.

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