

Learning to Spell: A Developmental Process

Learning to spell is a gradual process and is not limited to memorizing lists. In spite of its complexity, English spelling has a system that can be learned. In fact, learning that system can be interesting, challenging, and certainly rewarding.

Just as we do not expect a baby to begin speaking complete sentences, we should not expect a child to understand the conventions of English spelling right away. Children generally move through five stages on their way to becoming writers who can spell proficiently.

1. The Random-Letter Stage

In their earliest attempts, children may write a series of individual letters and numerals that may look like this:

- **Is7or**
- **FLsoO**
- **3msE6**

This may be a "story" or grocery list. Individual letters may represent whole words. This is their first step toward organizing symbols, even though the written marks don't look like the words they represent. But this jumble of squiggles is important because the child has a rudimentary idea of what a word should look like: a series of letters grouped in a row, not spread all over the page.

2. Estimated Spelling

When children begin to form separate words, they may write some of them correctly because they remember what they have seen. However, when they attempt words they don't know, children often resort to estimating the spelling. This means that they write letters that represent the word, but they don't account for all the sounds or syllables. Some examples of estimated spellings include:

- **bk** (book)
- **hos** (house)
- **grl** (girl)
- **rembr** (remember)
- **difrnt** (different)
- **prt** (pretty)

First graders will often take wild stabs at difficult words such as tyrannosaurus or triceratops. Encourage these attempts because you want children to try to write messages. Learners need to be given a chance to figure out some things for themselves while the rules and conventions of spelling are being introduced. They need to learn to listen carefully to words and their

sounds. As they do so, combined with phonics instruction at school, they will gradually identify relationships between sounds and letter symbols.

3. Phonetic Spelling

In the next stage, children refine their efforts by relying more on phonetic spelling. They attempt to find a letter or letters for all the sounds they hear in a word. In this stage, they may substitute one vowel for another, or they may use the right letters in the wrong order:

- **weth** (with)
- **whair** (where)
- **tiyered** (tired)
- **faverit** (favorite)
- **gril** (girl)
- **frens** (friends)

Even though these words are misspelled, if you "sound them out" you realize that most of these phonetic spellings do approximate the sounds of the words they represent.

4. Use of Visual Markers

The next step marks the transition from phonetic spelling to a more visual approach. This requires children to move away from the safe, concrete method of letters representing *sounds* and begin to recognize the importance of the *visual* aspect of spelling.

For example, some words incorporate letters that are not sounded (the k in *knee* or the w in *sword*). Other words such as *psychology* and *silhouette* have unusual spelling patterns because they originated in foreign languages. Gradually, children become aware of these complex conventions of English spelling.

Some basic spelling patterns are encountered very often, such as the *ay* in *day* or the *ai* in *rain*; the use of *-ed* and *-ing* at the end of many verbs (*looked* and *looking*); and the use of the silent *e* to distinguish between short and long vowels (as in *hop* and *hope*).

5. Mature Spelling

By the age of ten or twelve, most children reach a fairly mature level of spelling ability. They are familiar with the most frequently used spelling patterns; they understand how to form plural nouns (*book, books; box, boxes*) or to change verb tenses (*raise, raised, raising*); they know how to form contractions (*don't*) and compound words (*classroom*); they have learned many words that have unusual spellings (*neighbor, sight*); and they can distinguish between words with the same sounds but different spellings and meanings (*right* and *write* or *wood* and *would*).

Learning to spell should be a voyage of discovery. You can show your child that the learning of spelling rules and conventions can not only be enjoyable, but a necessary lifelong skill.

A good example of the complete process is found in the way children deal with the word *make*. After the initial random-letter stage, they usually master this word in the following way:

- **mk** - This is the *estimated* spelling using only consonant sounds. Young children often are not aware that vowels are included in the spelling.
- **mak** - Next is *phonetic* spelling, including the vowel letter. The child has not yet discovered the significance of the final letter *e*.
- **maek** - This spelling demonstrates the *visual marker*, the silent letter *e*. It just isn't in the right place yet.
- **make** - This *mature* spelling places the final *e* in the right place to serve as a marker for the long *a* sound.