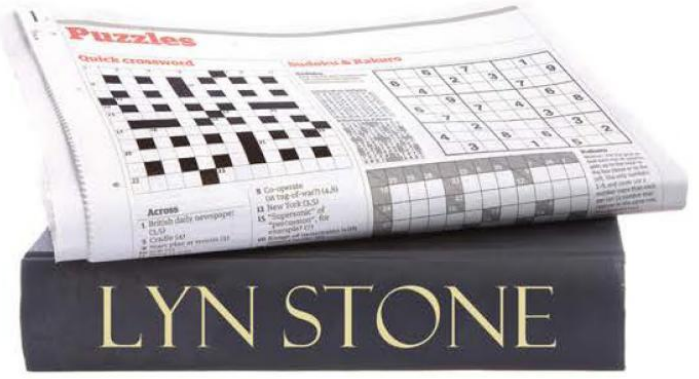
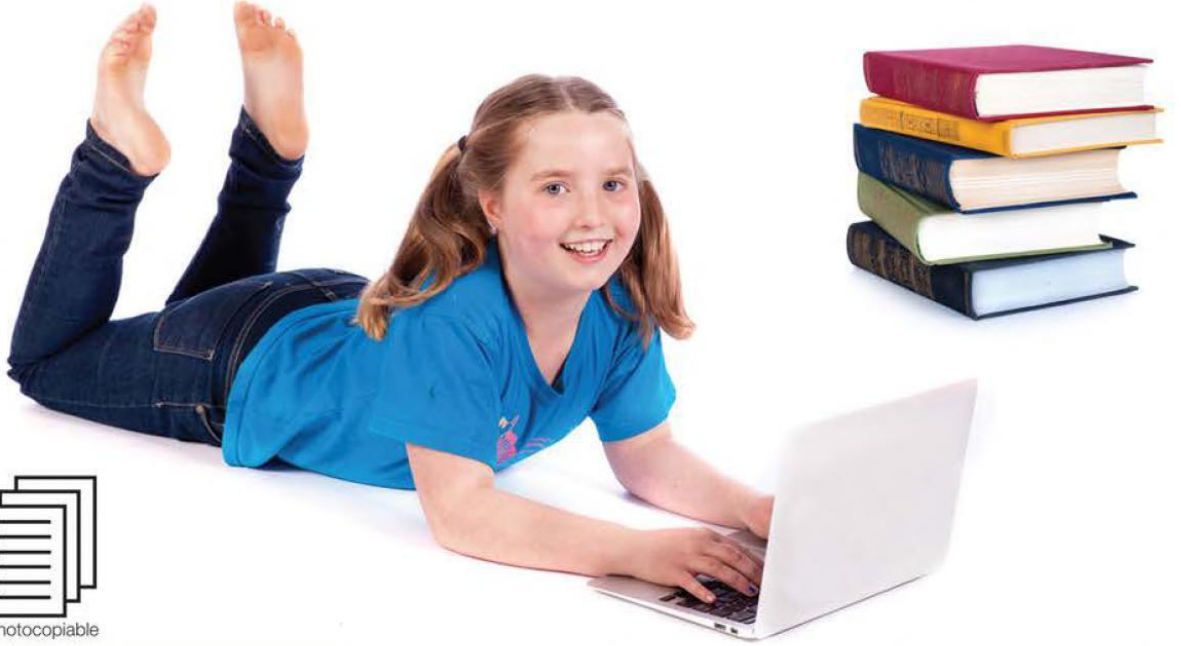


SPELLING for Life

Uncovering the simplicity and science of spelling



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A **David Fulton** Book

Foreword by Professor Anatoly Liberman, author of the weekly column 'The Oxford Etymologist'

Spelling for Life

Uncovering the simplicity and science of spelling

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Illustrations by Ailsa Dunnachie-Young

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Stone, Lyn, 1971–
Spelling for life : uncovering the simplicity and science of spelling / Lyn Stone.
pages cm
1. English language–Orthography and spelling–Study and teaching (Primary) I. Title.
LB1526.S76 2013
372.63'2–dc23
2013018820

ISBN: 978-0-415-85692-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-85693-5 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-88367-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Helvetica
by Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton

Contents

Foreword

I could never have imagined that I would one day agree to recommend a book espousing principles so contrary to my own as *Spelling for Life*. I believe that English spelling is inconsistent, too burdened with its medieval heritage, and therefore sometimes unmanageable, while Lyn Stone assures us that it is 'an elegant, pattern-based system, which becomes apparent if examined thoughtfully.' But then I engage in quixotic battles for spelling reform, a reform that will, I am afraid, never be carried out (implemented, as her Scottish kin might say), while she has devoted years to teaching children, sick and dyslexic children among them, how to spell and achieved laudable results. I have nothing but admiration for her efforts, even though my views on English spelling remain unaltered. But perhaps there is greater honor (allow me to stick to American spelling and grammar in this Foreword) in receiving praise from an opponent than from a member of one's own party.

At a time when the sons of English gentlemen were routinely sent to public (that is, private) schools, so at least until the 1890s, some of their textbooks bore titles like *Exercises in Etymology* and *Lessons* in *Etymology*. Those manuals had very little to do with etymology as we today understand it, because their subject matter was grammar (morphology with elements of syntax) and word formation. *Spelling for Life* reminds me of those useful books. Today few people remember them, but at an age in which English grammar was supposed to replicate the grammar of Latin they must have served their purpose well. The young Winston Churchill was still made to 'decline' the noun *table* so: nominative (*table*), genitive (*of the table*), dative (*to the table*), accusative (*table*), ablative (*by the table*), and vocative (*o table*). He was puzzled by the vocative, but that form, the examiner told him, occurred when he apostrophized a table, which, by his admittance, he never did.

In the early twentieth century, thanks to the efforts of many prominent linguists, children (no longer only boys!) began to study English grammar along modern lines. All went reasonably well until somebody – not too long ago – discovered that grammar was boring and not 'fun.' Fun, the backbone of modern instruction in all areas, banished grammar. So today's undergraduates swoon when they hear the phrase *subjunctive mood outside subordinate*

clauses. But experience shows that, when teachers know how to do things properly, the audience, regardless of the level, understands and enjoys grammar and 'etymology' in all its aspects.

Spelling for Life is informed with the spirit of optimism and the author's belief in children's ability and readiness to master difficulties. Every page in it is based on experience and convinces the user that, indeed, language system can and should be presented to a class of eager learners and that the presentation will bear fruit. Step by step Lyn Stone goes through vowels, consonants, and syllable structure, introduces such concepts as homophones, touches on the role of foreign elements in English (this would be etymology by any definition), explains the meaning of exceptions, which often also follow rules, and reveals laws where at first sight lawlessness reigns supreme.

Perhaps no evidence is needed to prove that English spelling can be mastered. After all, most of us end up as tolerably good spellers (in this respect English-speakers do not differ from their French, German, or Russian counterparts), though I know no one who would not sometimes be in doubt about the shape of words like *reconstructable* (isn't it *reconstructible*?), *schism*, *skeptic*, *ascetic*, or *chthonic*. Those, however, are negligible crumbs. The real pie is more digestible. Even if we agree that English spelling is an elegant, pattern-based system of writing, the pattern requires an earnest effort to learn, and we would perhaps be better off if *quarter* were spelled *kwarter*, *unscathed* were spelled *unskathed*, and *gnaw* lost its initial *g*. (And what about Lin for Lyn?) But let me repeat: This is not an issue for Lyn Stone. She has an artifact before her, enjoys its complex beauty, and wants to open her pupils' eyes to it. In this she has succeeded in an exemplary way; her book is practical from first page to last. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and the uses to which her work can be put will be obvious to every unprejudiced teacher.

In principle, *Spelling for Life* can be consulted anywhere in the English speaking world, given an enthusiastic instructor and a malleable class. But whom have bad instructors taught anything, and what have those learned who fought their teachers? Teaching is like love: it brings happiness only if it is requited. I wish the book loving users and a long life on library shelves and especially in the classroom.

Anatoly Liberman, author of the weekly column 'The Oxford Etymologist'

Preface

Sexy jobs for linguists

I'm sure you've seen television crime shows where some clever linguist analyses a voice pattern or a sample of handwriting and helps the detectives catch the criminal.

Forensic linguistics is what I call one of the 'sexy' careers for linguists. I'm not even sure it exists.

Another sexy career is being an accent consultant for Hollywood movies. The existence of this job is also somewhat doubtful if the dialogue in *Braveheart* is anything to go by.

Fantasy jobs aside, some linguists don't even get to use their degrees directly in their careers, such is the nature of employment in our modern world.

I am very lucky, then, to have been able to use my degree in my career from the moment I graduated until the present day. This has been the source of some of my life's greatest pleasures.

Not long after obtaining my B.A. and moving to Australia, I was lucky enough to land a job in a Lindamood-Bell clinic in Sydney. Even their basic training was an unbelievably dense, exceptionally vivid example of how to use linguistics and neuroscience to change literacy and, as a consequence, lives.

A few years later, my Spalding training at the Speech, Language and Literacy Centre, under the peerless tutelage of Mary-Ruth Reed, deepened and broadened my knowledge of linguistics as it applies to literacy in countless ways.

Over those years it came to my notice that those who struggled with spelling, and not necessarily other components of literacy, had sets of pattern-based habits predictable from a relatively small example of their writing.

Coupled with this, there were times when it was impossible to deliver the very complex and time-consuming Lindamood and/or Spalding programmes to their full extent. I kept having to ask myself, 'What principles can I teach this learner that are going to give them the biggest bang for their buck?'

The answer always seemed to follow the same general pattern. I began to collate my clinical notes and noticed that the path to spelling improvement always took certain turns.

This path evolved into handouts and informal knowledge-sharing with my colleagues until it began to emerge as a consistent, cohesive set of lesson plans and charts.

Deciding to take this knowledge further, I began consulting to schools and holding seminars and developed a work-in-progress called 'Spelling for Life'.

I don't claim to be an academic linguist by any means, having obtained my B.A. in 1994, but I do feel that I have been allowed to continuously put into practice all the wonderful theory taught to me about the structure of language. It is my privilege to be able to observe how language works on a daily basis and to have the chance to help figure out what to do when a particular aspect isn't working.

This is my attempt to help figure out what to do when spelling isn't working, or at least to help prevent spelling from not working.

Acknowledgements

Without the sacrifices my mother and father made to bring me up all over the world and put me through a first-class school education, I might never have become interested in linguistics.

Without the top-quality tuition and brilliance of Dick Hudson and the Linguistics department at UCL I might never have gained the knowledge necessary to write this book.

Without the deep and broad expertise of geniuses in their fields, Phyllis Lindamood, Lidwina van Dyk and Mary-Ruth Mendel, I might never have figured out how to put all this knowledge together to write this book.

Without the courage, humour and dedication of my wonderful students, who laughed at my silly jokes and let me do experiments on them, I might never have been able to shape this book into something useful.

Without the patience, encouragement and unconditional love of my husband Byron, I might never have had the time and space to use that knowledge to write this book. He's really good at I.T. as well, which has helped enormously.

My three beautiful girls have not only provided me with a first-hand perspective on child language acquisition, but were also awfully well-behaved while I developed this book.

Without the patient, gentle but direct and ever-so-rapid critiques from my teachers and fellows Chris Burdess, Fiona Duffy and Rex Harley, I might never have had the confidence to let this book be what it is.

Many thanks also to my pedantic proofers and processors, Tony Greenwood, Gez Runham, Kenny Reay, David Squire, Mark Copland and David McKenzie.

And finally, for the unflinching feedback, consistent support and highly instructive, enlightening and entertaining dialogue on the nature of pedagogy, I would also like to thank the Australian schools and teachers who have provided me with the impetus over all these years to keep writing this book.

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Sound to symbol notation

Rather than use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is adorable, but would force the reader to learn a whole new set of symbols, the major vowel sounds in this book are represented by the following notation:

/a/ as in ‘cat’
/ay/ as in ‘day’
/ah/ as in ‘bath’
/e/ as in ‘get’
/ee/ as in ‘see’
/i/ as in ‘sit’
/ie/ as in die
/o/ as in ‘not’
/oe/ as in ‘toe’
/u/ as in ‘gum’
/ue/ as in ‘cue’
/oo/ as in ‘too’
/uu/ as in ‘put’
/oy/ as in ‘boy’
/ou/ as in ‘house’

The vowel sounds above are based on an accent called Received Pronunciation (RP). This is the standard form of a standard English accent. We have to start somewhere, and we might as well start with the most common, relatable English accent.

The only IPA symbols used are /ə/ (Chapter 18) and /ʒ/ (Chapter 22). For reasons that will become clear, they are necessary and unavoidable.

Types of bracketing

‘’ single quotation marks are used to surround alphabet letters. When the reader sees them, it is a signal for them to say the letters within, e.g. the letter ‘s’ is also a suffix.

Single quotation marks are also used to surround example words.

// slanted brackets are used to surround sounds. When the reader sees them, it is a signal for them to say the sound those letters represent, e.g. the letter ‘c’ makes a /s/ sound before ‘e’.

- the dash is to represent an incomplete word. It indicates that there is at least one letter or one syllable in its place, e.g. let’s write some more -ble words or the prefix re- means ‘back’ or ‘again’.

Introduction

A quick survey entitled 'Spelling is . . .' will often yield words like 'difficult, complicated, inconsistent, archaic, cumbersome, inconvenient, antiquated, unpredictable, random . . .'

Whilst I acknowledge that it is possible to find spelling difficult and that it can appear complex, I cannot agree with the rest of the descriptions.

I find the field of automotive mechanics difficult and complex but I know it takes no more than average intelligence nd a lot of learning and practice to master it. Nobody calls that random.

Some people are natural mechanics and, with some practice, can take to it with ease. Others have less aptitude and need to start at the very beginning and work their way through the subject.

I actually don't know any field of knowledge that isn't like this, yet spelling has such a bad reputation.

I would like to offer a means of taking this much-maligned and misunderstood subject and viewing it as a scientific system that evolved through various processes of selection to become an elegant, stable, law-abiding and satisfying means of communication. You just have to know certain things about it and it is best to learn those things in a certain order.

By calling spelling beautiful and elegant, perhaps I'm imposing my own aesthetic sense onto it, but I think a balance is due.

Those who are natural spellers don't spell well by accident. They have learned certain things. This book is an attempt to focus on those things.

It is not a panacea that will cure all learning difficulties, but at the very least, the lessons strive to impart core (not basic) knowledge.

Basic knowledge (phonics) is taught, in most modern school systems, in the first two years.

This book is about teaching core knowledge in the years subsequent to that and can be used from that point onwards and even in secondary and adult learning settings.

Teaching spelling is not so much to do with being able to explain all the rules and have all the reasons for exceptions readily available, but it's about making the decision to construct a lesson using one or more of the following strategies:

- core rules,
- mnemonics,
- word families

Much emphasis is placed on discovering why some words are exceptional, and in that discovery, we help to reveal a deeper rule-structure and thus avoid having to revert to the 'just because . . .' explanation of irregular words.

What things and in what order?

There are 24 chapters in this book, mostly comprising self-contained lessons.

Some can be taught at any stage, as they do not require anything but the ability to listen and respond, some require a grounding in phonics and hand-writing skills and some require all this as well as word and world knowledge commensurate with mainstream middle primary children. Each chapter has a lesson plan specifying skill level required.

A rough duration is given for each lesson and the delivery of the programme, if done from start to finish in a mainstream middle-primary classroom, would take between 20 and 30 contact hours.

This does not take into account the material in Chapters 1–8, which can be used at your discretion at various junctures.

Links to supporting videos

Many chapters and lessons are supported by free videos that show examples of teaching the concepts in the book. You do not have to view these videos to be able to teach the lessons. Links to these constantly updated videos can be found on the Linguist Learning website (www.linguistlearning.com).

Patterns to discover

One of the unique qualities of *Spelling for Life* is that it was created knowing that English spelling follows stable, predictable patterns, just like mathematics. Each concept reveals a pattern.

Discovering these patterns can be a profoundly enriching experience for pupils. The patterns to be discovered are listed in the lesson plans.

Lesson plans

Each lesson has a step-by-step plan which includes notes on prerequisite knowledge, materials and approximate duration.

Most of the lessons have worksheet resources that can be printed, enlarged if necessary and distributed. Examples of completed worksheets are also included where necessary.

Wherever appropriate, the lesson plans mention the typical error pattern that the lesson is attempting to erase. Spelling errors are often pattern-based and are the result of habits or coping strategies that *can* be undone.

Example lessons

When I was being trained to deliver various literacy programmes, time and time again I wished that I could instantly say the exact words that my teachers said to their pupils. They made teaching these programmes look so easy.

This is why I have provided example lessons. These lessons are in a conversational style typical of one that I would have with my pupils. Familiarise yourself with these if you wish, and by all means feel free to adapt them to your own style. They are merely there to help.

In the example lessons, answers to all questions are capitalised in brackets after the question.

The questions and answers will look like this:

Ownwork

The general pattern in *Spelling for Life* is to set a piece of 'ownwork' for every rule or concept delivered.

This usually consists of learning to read and spell some sight words and finding examples of and exceptions to rules.

The ownwork is restricted to single-word exercises, as these are the building blocks of all the other language-arts activities your pupils will experience in their daily lives.

If pupils genuinely have trouble finding words for the tasks, it is okay to help them by suggesting words they could use.

Spelling drills

At the end of many chapters there is a spelling drill, designed to be used as a method of exercising the most recently learned rules. These are dictated orally and scored.

The drills show pupils their progress. They also give you an idea of what, if anything, you might need to revise and help you with your lesson planning.

Differentiation

You can distribute blank or partially filled worksheets, depending on the skill level of your pupils.

Lists and examples

None of the lists included here are exhaustive or exclusive of any other list. They have simply been compiled over many years in the clinic as my personal store of examples.

Spelling lessons often require example words from pupils. It is my strong suggestion that whenever possible, the definition of the example word is also provided, e.g. if a pupil suggests a word that doesn't fall into the first few hundred vocabulary words on most wordlists, by all means accept it, but also ask for a definition. If the definition isn't known, take the time to look it up in a good dictionary, noting etymology if possible.

This simple tactic not only demonstrates excellent vocabulary-building habits, but enriches and strengthens your pupils' vocabularies exponentially. Take each word as an opportunity for exploration and you will be the teacher responsible for opening your pupils' eyes to the depth and breadth of our language.

1 Broken rules and word stories

> *But though writing is an artificial contraption connecting vision and language, it must tap into the language system at well-demarcated points, and that gives it a modicum of logic.*
>
> Pinker (1994)

There is a common myth that English spelling is hard to learn. Many of our words don't have a 1:1 sound to symbol match, that is true, but the vast majority do conform to predictable rules. Chomsky and Halle (1968) and C. Chomsky (1970) refer to English spelling as 'optimal', in terms of conveying both sound and meaning. That's a good sign. The problem is that it is tempting to be frightened of words which aren't predictable by the better-known rules.

Exceptions

The lessons in this book are constructed not only to illustrate the core rules of English spelling but also to encourage discussion of exceptions. The idea is to get pupils to revel in the exceptions. Too often, a pupil is proud to learn and demonstrate a rule, only to be confounded by an exception. Looking for exceptions leads to confidence in the rules and ideally to the realisation that English spelling and reading is easier than initially thought.

In many cases, words which don't 'play fair' (i.e. that appear to break the core rules) are common, so a pupil is likely to run into an exception very quickly. The only way round this is to boldly announce that there are exceptions to every rule and that they should be celebrated. This will not only build confidence and reinforce these very important rules, but will also build vocabulary and strengthen the ability to investigate.

Words which break the core rules do so for certain basic reasons that not only reflect past influences (their word story), but also highlight the ever-changing nature of language.

We will, then, examine regular and seemingly irregular words and do several things with them:

- notice which rule applies or is broken
- investigate the reason for the perceived break, i.e. the word story
- assign the words to groups that share common characteristics, what we will call word families.

Before pattern and core rule study begins, it is important to understand why certain words appear to break the rules and how to tackle them.

The seven major stories of exceptional words are:

1 Borrowed words – as we move toward globalisation, words from other languages continue to swell our lexicon (‘spaghetti’, ‘ski’, ‘haiku’).
2 Abbreviations – words which, when shortened, break conventional spelling rules (‘rev’ from ‘revolution’, ‘taxi’ from ‘taxicab’, ‘mini’ from ‘miniature’).
3 Acronyms – words made from the first letter or letters of other words (‘Qantas’, ‘lol’ etc.).
4 Names – place names often break the core rules because they belong to other languages with other sets of rules (‘Iraq’, ‘Benghazi’). Human names often don’t conform because they are created through a process of parental invention rather than linguistic evolution (‘Dannii’, ‘Keanu’).
5 Jargon – technical/scientific vocabulary (‘radii’, ‘caesarean’, ‘schwa’).
6 Old and/or common – words that are obeying rules from times past, whose spelling hasn’t caught up with the way we say them (‘horse’, ‘have’, ‘could’, ‘of’).
7 Slang – vocabulary used by a particular generation of younger speakers or groups (‘chav’, ‘wassup’, ‘ermahgerd’).

Or BAANJOS, as I like to remember them (said in a Southern US accent to help me remember the extra ‘a’).

Lesson plan

Skill level

This lesson can be done as soon as pupils start reading and writing words.

Materials

- Figure 1.1 Mouth picture
- Figure 1.2 Book picture
- Figure 1.3 Word stories example worksheet
- Figure 1.4 Word stories blank worksheet.

Figure 1.1 Mouth picture

Figure 1.2 Book |

Figure 1.3 Word stories example worksheet

Pattern

When words appear to break the rules, it is because they entered our language by one of seven major paths. These paths are the word's 'story'.

Error pattern

Defeatism, or the belief that spelling is random.

Duration

10 minutes per word story. Not all stories have to be done at once.

Step 1

You can either have a target word in mind when you deliver this lesson, or you can just use the lesson to introduce the idea that there are exceptions to rules in spelling.

Figure 1.4 Word stories blank worksheet

Distribute a word stories blank worksheet (Figure 1.4). Explain that examining how a word entered our language (their story) helps us understand why some words don't 'play fair'.

Step 2

Brainstorm the word stories and write them in the worksheet with examples. You might only come up with a couple of stories at this point. Refer back to this sheet as they occur. You can print multiple sheets for all the different lessons and you may also want to create a large, central word stories worksheet for display in the classroom.

Step 3

This is a visual way of explaining why some of our most common words are exceptional. Establish the relative rates of change of spoken v. written communication using a picture of a mouth and a book, to represent spoken v. written communication (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Example lesson

Languages are like people. They change throughout time. They also change more when they are used more.

Imagine you were given a brand new bicycle for Christmas. If you took it out every day and rode it, what changes might there be by Easter? (MUD, SCRATCHES, GENERAL WEAR AND TEAR)

Imagine that same bike at Christmas again, and this time, think what it would be like at Easter if you left it in its box that whole time and didn't use it at all. Would it have changed much? (NO)

Language is like that bike. The more you use a word, the more likely it is to change.

Our language is very old and has changed a lot over time.

But one way in which we use language has changed faster than the other because we use it much more.

Which way of using language happens more? Speaking or writing? (SPEAKING)

2 Word families

Neurons that fire together, wire together.

Hebb's Law

Most of my professional life has been spent working with children who are struggling with some aspect of language. There are times when I have had the pleasure of teaching adults too. The most memorable of these was a 79-year-old man, originally from Missouri, who walked into my clinic and announced that he didn't want to go through life any more without the ability to spell.

John was raised during the Great Depression and had very little schooling to speak of, but had taught himself to read and to avoid writing so that nobody knew about his lack of education.

We did lessons once a week for an hour and he was a keen learner, though progress was quite slow. Not only did he have deeply ingrained habits when he wrote, but I also suspected that he was in fact dyslexic. Decades of quiet determination had given him a relatively large and certainly workable sight-word vocabulary, but his ability to self-correct and his knowledge of spelling conventions were really poor.

I also noticed something odd about his lexicon in general. I could successfully teach him to memorise a word like 'house' or 'like', but if a form of the word came up later, say during dictation, e.g. 'houses' or 'liked', he often couldn't spell them.

When questioned about 'houses', I distinctly remember him saying, 'But you didn't ask me to spell *house*. I can spell that, look: h-o-u-s-e.'

I asked him why he didn't just add an -s to get 'houses' and he looked at me as if I were mad. 'They're different words!' he kept insisting.

In seven decades it had not occurred to him once that words could be altered to form new words, or indeed that any words were connected to one another except for those in wide semantic groups, such as 'mother', 'father', 'daughter', 'son'.

Research has shown that sometimes this particular understanding about words, which many of us take for granted, does not automatically occur to everyone (Ellis 1993).

Good spellers often have a highly developed sense of word-connectedness. Developing this sense is not only possible, therefore, but desirable and ultimately necessary.

An effective way to learn related facts about spelling is to analyse words by means of a word family (Nagy *et al*. 1989).

This chapter provides a guide to the creation of word families. This then helps pupils both to learn spelling patterns and to learn irregular words in connected sets.

Word families are tools to help compare and contrast words and their forms, features or functions. In other words, what a given word is, has or does.

Each time a word family is generated, the brain's storage and retrieval system is called upon. This is a brain-building exercise (see Appendix 2: The orders of intelligence).

Words analysed and learnt according to related characteristics help strengthen neural networks. This kind of analysis can also aid pupils to come to the realisation that words form a vast network, governed by a small set of predictable rules.

A word can exist in more than one family at a time, depending on the nature of the analysis. The core analytical categories are:

Form

The form is the way in which target words are spelled (or spelt).

For instance, the words 'spell' and 'tell' have the same form in the present tense. In the past tense, however, they take different forms. 'Spell' can become 'spelt' but 'tell' becomes 'told'.

Therefore an analytical focus on a family according to form would have 'spell' and 'smell' together in the same family ('spelt' and 'smelt') but 'sell' and 'tell' together in a different one ('sold' and 'told').

Feature

Words can also be related by common features. For instance, words ending with an /ee/ sound are commonly spelled with a word-final -y, not -ey (see Chapter 12: The letter 'y').

There is a set of words ending in -ey that can be learned as a separate word family.

Unlike form-related words, feature-related words don't carry meaning within their common parts, but often do share a common ancestry which helps to explain why they are exceptional.

Function

Analysing families of words according to their function is an exercise in morphology and syntax.

Function means what the word is doing in the sentence and how it relates to other words (syntax), that is, what part of speech it is.

Suffixes often determine function (morphology).

Here's an example: words ending with -ous usually denote adjectives: 'famous', 'religious', 'abstemious' etc.

Words ending with -ing usually denote verbs: 'walking', 'running', 'singing'.

It's up to you and your pupils to work out the best way of analysing and organising words for a particular family.

Word family analysis can also be used to compare and contrast homophones.

Worksheets are not necessary here; all it takes is a page in an exercise book per family. Simply write the word/words, decide on the focus and then find other words in that family.

John helped me develop the techniques included in this chapter and I dedicate it to his memory.

Lesson plan

Prerequisite Knowledge: Can be used any time a group of words emerges.

Step 1

Turn to a blank notebook page and write the target word(s) at the top.

Step 2

Decide and write down whether your focus is the word's form, feature or function and write it down. Feel free to guide pupils with this decision until they develop an eye for it.

Step 3

Gather words and compile the family. Add new words as they come up.

Step 4

For shorter lists, you can also create sentences and stories to weave the words together. For example, to assist with the feature -eir: 'Their heir was weird.'

TIP: Use this tool often and use plenty of examples.

Pattern to establish

Words don't exist in isolation. They can always be connected to other words through their form, feature or function.

Error pattern

Some pupils see words as individual units which have to be memorised as such. This can make the idea of learning to spell understandably terrifying.

1 Example of a word family which shows common inflections
Form: -ought in past tense
Family:

PRESENT	*PAST*
buy	*bought*
bring	*brought*
think	*thought*
seek	*sought*
fight	*fought*

2 Example of a word family contrasting 'accept/except'
The two target words in the families above are commonly mistaken for one another. Analysis of the feature that differentiates them, i.e. the prefix, is useful in helping pupils pick the right one.

Figure 2.1 Accept/except word family

Further analysis of their common feature, the root -cept- is also useful:
Common feature: '-cept-', meaning 'take'
When you 'accept' you take in, when you 'except' you take out.
Family:

reception, concept, intercept

3 Example of a word family showing exceptions
Feature: words ending in -ey
Words ending in an /ee/ or /i/ sound usually end in -y
Family:

Common
money, journey, valley, turkey, abbey, honey, jersey, jockey galley, chimney, monkey, trolley, kidney, alley, donkey, barley, storey, hockey, parsley, hackney, whiskey, blimey, crikey

Less common
bailey, paisley, attorney, volley, cockney, matey, joey, chutney, pulley, gurney, medley, Guernsey, odyssey, motley, gulley, cagey, bogey

4 Example of a word family showing common parts of speech
Function: adjective shown by suffix -al

trivial, final, casual, monumental

3 Homophones

Homo- – same, -phone – sound

A homophone is a word that sounds just like another word, the only difference is that it means something else and can be spelled differently. This can cause confusion when trying to spell the right word.

A special kind of word family can be used to help distinguish homophones. Take, for example, the word ‘plane’. A plane is a flying vehicle, e.g. ‘I took the plane home.’

Plane is also something you do to make a surface flat or smooth, e.g. ‘You will need a special tool to plane that wood.’

There is also a word that sounds exactly like this but is spelled differently: ‘plain’, which also has several meanings:

- Not colourful or complex: ‘His car was a plain white colour.’
- An expanse of rural land: ‘This building site used to be a plain.’

Homophones are distinct from other words that sound very similar and are commonly confused, such as ‘assistants’ and ‘assistance’. Indeed, in some accents, these words are indistinguishable in normal speech. In this case, they are homophones.

A simple mnemonic sentence, such as ‘Let’s plane the plane’ or ‘We drove the plain car across the plain’ helps group the common spellings of the homophones in memory.

To work anything out in spelling, it is always a good idea to start with what you know and then look for the pattern. So it is with homophones.

For instance: stationery/stationary

A station**er** is one who provides stationery, as denoted by the suffix -er (one who does). So ‘station**er**y’ is the thing that is provided.

In the meantime, and perhaps with more complexity, 'station**ary'** has the -ary suffix, denoting an adjective, as in 'primary', 'secondary', 'military' and 'evolutionary'.

Explaining 'stationary' first is slightly more complex because -ary is also a noun suffix ('anniversary', 'notary', 'aviary', 'obituary' etc.). However, these nouns cannot be reduced any further by taking away the -y suffix (e.g. 'stationery/stationer') and leaving a complete word ('anniversar', 'notar', 'aviar', 'obituar'), thus providing a neat distinction between the homophones.

Looking at homophones and their common features also provides opportunities for pupils to make generalisations about other words.

Take 'currant/current'. The -ant ending is common in nouns ('accountant', 'antioxidant', 'hydrant' etc.) whereas the -ent ending is a common adjective suffix ('different', 'negligent', 'present') and a noun suffix in roughly equal measure ('student', 'unemployment', 'present').

Homophone study and word families can be used together to help consolidate knowledge about morphemes and suffixes.

Below is a framework for some homophone study. Then follows an alphabetical list of homophones. The list can be used in a number of ways:

- As a list that pupils search independently to help produce families for their chosen words.
- As a list that the teacher keeps for reference, pulling out appropriate homophones as needed.
- As a list that teacher and pupils go through progressively, adapting the contents somewhat for age-appropriateness. For example, most primary-school children will be able to access the difference between 'humerus/humorous', 'lumber/lumbar', 'pigeon/pidgin', but 'parasite/pericyte', 'insist/encyst' or 'ferrule/ferule'[1] have slightly more specialised or archaic meanings.

By all means use these words if only to highlight the fact that this generation has it considerably easier than generations past.

1 *ferule* n. a flat ruler with a widened end, formerly used for beating children.