

# THE BOOK OF SPELLS AND MISSPELLS

A treasury of spelling for everyone  
with selections from Ron Tandberg, Andrew  
Weldon,  
Phillip Adams, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain,  
William Shakespeare, the worldwide web and  
many others

Valerie Yule

Illustrations are not shown here and may be obtained

separately

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## Preface: a revel in the earliest information technology – writing

Spelling has two real purposes, fun and communication. We can have both. We who are fascinated by crosswords, codes and Scrabble™, can be fascinated by spelling itself.

This is a little treasury to dip into, swig, taste drop by drop, or follow the argument through from A to Z. It goes into a world that has been cruel to many in the name of literacy. It can enrage you or encourage you. Dozens of books are published every year to teach spelling, yet still spelling is not easy to learn. Titles like *Fun with Spelling* may offend against the Trade Descriptions Act. There is even a book, honest, on *Death by Spelling* (David Gram, 1989). Yet Bryson, Crystal, Truss and other lively best-sellers on language and even on punctuation, hint that spelling, too, can break the suitability barrier for Christmas presents for aunts and teenagers. Now Vivian Cook (2004) has given us a rich miscellany of spelling curiosities and current spelling flux, such that nobody can now ever be certain how to spell *Acomodate*, *Brocoli* or *Cemetery*. This book follows on with still more curiosities and curiosity. Spelling has wild shores. Who would have thought such topics to have so much blood in them!

There is graveyard humour and spelling humour. Where there's a will there's a spell. We dare to go over the top, and gallop on into the future. Our only punctuation rule is to go for clarity. Slips are possible, but occasionally the book will spell better than the dictionary. An unwanted letter may drop from the spelling, or 'ph' appear as 'f', which is the modern translation of the Greek F. A small prize to everyone who notices all the changes, and a certificate to everyone who notices none of them.

And may at last my weary age  
Find out the peaceful hermitage,  
The Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell,  
Where I may sit and rightly spell.  
John Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 645.

What else was it that Milton wrote? *Paradise Regained*.

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

A Spelling Witch tried to compensate for mischievous gifts that other fairies gave me at my cradle. Because I could not see a moving ball, the most important requirement at my school, she tried to make up for it with the ability never to spell 'mischievious'. I could take one look at 'affect' and never mix it up with 'effect'. I was proud of my perfect spelling. This pride was humbled when I faced the awful truths about spelling in the world. I married a professor who could never spell 'lenght' or 'idolatory'. I tuaght (sic) students who wrote what was kindly called 'Creative Spelling'. Undergraduates' essays began to confuse me about whether it was heterogenous or heterogeneous. I found that some students spelled better when spelling however they liked than when they tried to spell correctly, and I encountered failing learners who could read if they were given 'Spelling No Traps'. The headmistress of a little village school in Kent wept to me that her life's work had been in vain. For three generations, no child had left her school unable to spell 'because' and 'sincerely', yet every excuse written by past pupils for their current child at school misspelled one or both words.

One word rarely appears in the index of books on linguistics or reading, where it might reasonably be expected. I was advised not to mention it on the cover of this book, but I have. The word 'spelling' can arouse traumatic memories, so readers may substitute the euphemism 'SP', rather than requiring a personal stress counsellor to be supplied with every copy.

This book has zero tolerance for nonsense, and for spelling rules that are not common sense. There is a dirge that has long been part of childhood folklore:

Beware of heard, a dreadful word  
That looks like beard and sounds like bird.  
And dead – it's said like bed, not bead.  
For goodness sake, don't call it deed!  
Watch out for meat and great and threat.  
They rhyme with suites and straight and debt.  
And here is not a match for there,  
Nor dear and fear for pear and bear.

And cork and work and card and ward.  
And font and front and word and sword.  
And do and go, then thwart and cart.  
Come, come, I've hardly made a start.

# 1 Spelling and Culture

A short romp through spelling in technology, geography,  
history and literature

## Spelling as culture

There was an old man of Khartoum  
Who kept two tame sheep in his room  
To remind him, he said,  
of two friends who were dead,  
But he never could recollect whom.

English is a fabulous museum of linguistic fossils. (Kastner and West, Phonetics)

Spelling is widely known to be Culture. We accept -ibles and -ables, -ents and -ants, because we know that these express something important to us and our culture. Entomology, I have been told, is the reason why English spelling must be conserved. Let us go to the ants and check this out.

English is a living language. It keeps dictionary-makers busy with new words, new uses of words and now, new Englishes. Each generation and place has its own sort of English.

Spelling is not a living language. It is the repository of our culture. So we believe. Each stone and pebble, carefully preserved, tells a story that we ought to treasure. What

story? The story of spellings comes from the accidents of history and the intrusions of scholars, webs of links with ancient Greece and Rome, with Vikings, Angles, Saxons, Danes, Norman-French, with the Black Death and Caxton's Dutch and German printers, and how the outliers of the British Empire brought a tribute of new words with strange spellings transliterated from strange scripts. Let's look.

What, for example, does the spelling of the Australian National Anthem tell us?

Australians all, let us rejoice,  
For we are young and free,  
Our something something something something . . .  
and something girt by sea . . .

I asked Australians what they could share about their culture from the spelling of their national song. Some suggested that the short strong words might be Anglo-Saxon and the longer words perhaps Greek and Latin. You could imagine Anglo-Saxons at their Thing (Parliament), young and girt with somethings.

I tracked down the Old English, Northumbrian, Old Teutonic and Old French, using the Australian Macquarie Budget Dictionary backed up by the Concise Oxford Dictionary, since dictionaries can vary, and in the past, spellings were not fixed. Without tangling with grammar, inflexions and ancient markings, here is the Australian national anthem brought back to its etymological roots, to represent the richness of our culture:

Australiens eall, lettan us rejoiss,  
Fore we aron geong anda freo  
Ure sum thing sum thing sum thing sum  
Anda sum thing aron gyrdan bi sae.

4

(Thing should be spelled with that original Anglo-Saxon letter for /th/ that looks like a boiled egg in an eggcup, for



Eggfrith or Eggbert to breacan faestan.)

People love detective stories, and it is fascinating to ask why 'i before e except after c', and to discover the mixture of Latin and French sources that have determined whether a word ends with -ence or -ance, and the unpredictable uses of silent 'e' and doubled consonants. To reflect that the spelling of *Eschschol(t)zia*, the California poppy, records the Anglicisation of a Russian mistranslation of the eponym of a German botanist, and that the catch-phrase *All Sir Garnet*, meaning 'all right', and also spelled *all cigarnette*, *all segarnio* and *all sogarnio*, is supposed to derive from a British Field Marshal noted for probity. There is now an academic side-industry in finding out where earlier etymologists got it wrong and respelled harmless words to our peril.

People can still believe that they would miss out if English spelling did not show them the origins of words, rather than looking them up in a dictionary, if ever you wanted to know, as they do for every other language. Even young people can fear that leaving out an m in commission could mutilate the meaning of the word, causing unknown and mysterious problems. They have never traced how the Latin derivation of *commissionem* came into Middle English via Old French, and further back to the common derivation and meaning of the prefix *com/con/co*, and its relation to the cognate *commit* from *com mittere* *miss*. Hmm. Even Latin and Greek derivations may not be reliable – those *ins* and *ens* and *uns* and *coms*. Guesses and even confident opinions can be mistaken, as shown by H W Fowler of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* for 'anyone who is curious about the value of such knowledge'. Such as:

Belfry does not come from bell, bliss is not from bless, cocoa is not related to coconut, cookie comes from a Dutch word for cake, not from cook, crayfish does not come from fish, nor a cutlet from cut. Gingerly does not come from ginger, pen is not related to pencil, and river does not come from Latin *rivus*, a river.

Page from the first edition of Nathan Bailey's *Etymological English Dictionary* published in 1721

Words can drift from their original meanings – flair comes from French flaire from Latin flagrare, to smell. Word pairs like pan – panic, muse – music and weal – wealth were originally linked, but their connections are now in the realm of legend. The rich and curious archaeology of English spelling is a constant source of fun for writers on language. But how often in a day does anyone say to themselves, ‘How nice to see that this word comes from the Slav word splotska’, or that silly is thought to have meant blessed and should still be spelt selye or perhaps saelig.

English spelling is a fabulous museum for culture. Outside the museum, the value of spelling for our culture is its usefulness as a tool. A tool to communicate. The importance of a spade is for digging.

Dictionaries rather than spelling can be safer guides to word meanings. Then the pressure can be off to change words like manufacture or manual because they are believed to be male-chauvinist.

### Olde worlde spelling

It’s fascinating that ‘cow’, ‘beef’ and ‘bachelor’ all go back to the same Indo-Germanic root, but I’m not sure I want it reflected in the spelling.

(J G, on the Internet)

The belief that English spelling shows the history of the language is called the etymological principle. The belief that if spelling is changed to make words easier to spell, we would no longer know where words came from, and that would make them harder to spell, is called circular thinking.

Shakespeare is famous for inventing 40,000 new words – among other things. He made the most of his ‘little Latin and less Greek’ to make his new words. We still use thousands of the words he invented; others survive only in his plays, with notes for students in the margins. But Shakspere/Shaksper/Shakspeare was not pedantic about spelling. He never signed his own name correctly, coming from a family that ran to 34 different spellings of it. No

wonder some people have thought he must have been Bacon.

Scholars of his time wanted to re-spell Old English and Norman-French spellings according to the resurrected languages of the ancient world. Shakespeare poked fun at them with a pernickety character called Holofernes, croaking,

'I abhor such fanatical fantasms, such insociable and point-devise companions; such rackers of orthography, as to speak dout, when he should say doubt; det, when he should pronounce debt, d, e, b, t, not d, e, t. He clepeth (calls) a calf, cauf; half, hauf; neighbour vocatur nebour; neigh abbreviated ne . . . This is abhominable, it insinuateth me of insanie.

(Love's Labor's Lost, Act V, Scene 1)

Some of the scholarly 'back to basics' in spellings are notorious, such as admiral, adventure, scissors and knight, when the Middle Ages had got along quite all right with amiral, aventur, sisours and the Old English cniht, which were how they spoke those words.

A crash course in English history would help learners to spell, some say. This is a bit much for those children who do not even know where England is. Other languages may not even have a word for spelling, let alone need history lessons to help learn it. Poor spellers can feel less stupid, however, when they realise the problem is not themselves, but the spelling – a mixture of three writing systems: Old English, French and Latin, plus a dash from others. French words tend to be spelled in French, as in restaurant, boudoir, bourgeois, ballet, quiche, cafe« and fete. Old French words like boeuf and mouton took several hundred years to turn into the English beef and mutton. It is thought that the Black Death may have helped by causing a shortage of Norman-French teachers. Words like hotel, hospital, herb and cadet are now pronounced as English, but hour, honest, heir, depot, cachet and chalet have not yet mellowed. Foreign words keep their strange foreign spellings through inertia,

or the pleasure of knowing their exotic roots, or because they may look ridiculous in English spelling patterns: 'Looney took his feonsay to a matinay at the ballay and a restarong at a shalay and she lounjd by the buro eating keesh, aclairs and merangs and drinking shampain and conyac'.

Why bother about the origin of words in spelling? Because, like Everest, they are there, although as Fowler advised, 'etymological knowledge is of less importance to writers than might be supposed'. It is a funny sort of fun to explore how spellings have changed, when generations of learners have to learn the petrified outcomes. Spellings are the only modern tools expected to carry their own history around with them. 'Horseless carriages' at first still tried to look like horse-carriages, with carriage lamps and a place for the missing shafts, but now cars try to look like the future.

If you want to know how spellings became worse

I once explored a sample of spellings, and found that 61 per cent were different and often worse than their earlier versions. Nine per cent of the original spellings were closer to how we speak today. Some examples. Sithe, scol and sinder were Old English for scythe, school and cinder. Stomak, sisours and corde were Middle English for stomach, scissors and chord. Sentir and caractere were Old French for scent and character. Schooner was spelled sooner by the boat's designer in 1713, and choir comes from the Middle English quere from the Old French cuer.

Scholars of Greek changed sicamore to sycamore, sillab to syllable, simphonie to symphony and sirop to syrup. They turned fantosme to phantom, fenix to phoenix, fesant to pheasant, fleume to phlegm and filosofre to philosopher. Extra letters were added because the fashion admired elaboration, and changed spellings that had been closer to our present pronunciation. Old English blod, flod, tunge and tro became blood, flood, tongue and trough – which some people still pronounce as tro. Middle English broche, gess, plage, molde, beute, highte, lorel, sive and yung were

elaborated into brooch, guess, plague, mould, beauty, height, laurel, sieve and young. They changed French *garder* and *vue* into *guard* and *view*.

Old spellings still close to present pronunciation, such as *wurs*, *wurth*, *bisy*, *parlement*, *huni*, *sum*, *wunder*, *spunge* and *perswade* became *worse*, *worth*, *busy*, *parliament*, *honey*, *some*, *wonder*, *sponge* and *persuade*. Middle English *erthe*, *perle*, *lernen*, *ernest*, *serch* and *herd* became *earth*, *pearl*, *learn*, *earnest*, *search* and *heard*, confusing the pronunciation.

Silent letters that mislead pronunciation were added to *coude*, *lim*, *eir*, *exorter*, *rubarb*, *hole*, *iland*, *tyme*, *forain*, *ahter* or *eht*, *hous*, *engin*, *favorit* and *feminin*, to produce *could*, *limb*, *heir*, *exhort*, *rhubarb*, *whole*, *island*, *thyme*, *foreign*, *eight*, *house*, *engine*, *favourite* and *feminine*.

Letters were added to turn plain spellings into *ache*, *aisle*, *almond*, *anchor*, *colonel*, *crumb*, *delight*, *dinghy*, *foreign*, *ghastly*, *gherkin*, *ghost*, *haughty*, *island*, *lachrymose*, *posthumous*, *ptarmigan*, *queue* and *rhyme*. *Garde*, *gild*, *garanty*, *gyden* and *gise* were turned into *guard*, *guild*, *guarantee*, *guide* and *guise*.

The common spelling pattern for *y* in word endings, as in *happy* *baby*, was confused when spellings such as *bi*, *mi*, *drie*, *replien*, *trien*, *supplie* and *satisfier* were turned into *by*, *my*, *cry*, *dry*, *reply*, *try*, *supply*, and *satisfy*. The peculiar spellings *who*, *where* and *why* were originally spelled more phonetically in Old English with *hw*, as in *hwa*, *hwar* and *hwi*.

And old English words like *cwik* were given Frenchified spellings like *quick*. Over a third of words with the plain sound *e* have had their spellings changed, such as the old spellings *def*, *plesure*, *spred*, *medow* and *dremt*, used by Milton and in the Shakespeare folios.

## Modern spelling

Let us jump to spelling as Modern Culture. While spellings in dictionaries have shifted only a little over 250 years, the world itself has changed around them in the past thirty.

They spell with their thumbs

RU2BZ2TRI2REDTHIS?? NSR QIK. Spelling on mobile phones for sending text messages has only two rules. Go fast, and hope the other end will understand you. For speed and economy, leave out spaces between words, like ancient Greek. Use letters as syllables, like Japanese, or as words, like Chinese, or like Hebrew, give words only as skeletons, as in RMMBA BNANA, or go for telegrafese and young children's spelling. Abandon the problems of traditional spelling. When friends communicate with each other, they are not at the same time considering their cultural heritage.

TXMSG SpLn cannot replace the spelling we have in print because you need to be in the know about its tricks, although, indeed, you need to be in the know with traditional spelling. Users share common idioms and buzz-phrases to work out MSGs such as:

YUDO You're under doctor's orders  
WIPO World Intellectual Property Organisation  
SDI Selective dissemination of information  
or Strategic Defence Initiative  
NGUTE I'm not giving up that easily

There are also many smartypants taunts, better not to know.

If you want to know how to send Text Messages . . .  
Dubld consonants? Omit them! 2moro Bak, Hec, OFa, LuK, MoBDik. Words that sound the same? Who cares? No = know, Rap = wrap. Final s or z or c: BiZniZ, DAz, Hz, Hznt, Nobz, Woz, Sox, Fascin8, Is = eyes. Soft sounds like j or sh: DANjrus, MchEn. Grgus = gorgeous. Rg = rage. Letters X, L, M, N, R, S to spell syllables - Xclusiv, Xcus, Xtreme, Clevr, Evl, REdr, TraFk, Opn, Rpulsv, Outa, FrEdm, GoTa, CatrpLa, Luvabl, ResQ. NETHng = anything, SRE = sorry, ANvrsrE = anniversary, Soons = soon as. Numbers used for spelling: U R not 2 B L8 4 1s. Street speech: F or V for th, N for ng, as in lsty, Wiv, STPin, Borin, Doin, Luvn, FLIn, Cumn, Goin, Mi\$n, Init = isn't it, GoNa, GIME. Solving tricky spellings: GENys, Larfn, Helthea, Blyud = billiard, Hlr = higher, SCe\$ = success, ACdnt = accident, U = you, ya = you/your, WAs = ways, Wd = would, HOl = whole, Us =

use.

And emoticons for fuzzy feelings across languages: I:-)U.

NSR QIK R U GONA FLI 2 TH EPOT? This is like the beginning spelling of children. The old Phillips Telegraphic Code was similar. A radio transmission in 1897 could look like this:

AA2ID de K4NT  
R R FB OM C U RECVD TX OK  
UR SIG 579  
QTH HR CHICAGO, IL  
CU LATER L FER U AGN ON BAND  
SO BK TO U  
73'S K4NT DE AA2ID

Over a hundred years later, 'Now we have God's com&ments 4U':

X CMDNMNTS  
1 God:Im No.1  
No pix,plz  
Uz my name nicely  
Day7 = holy  
Take care of mumNdad  
Dont kill, play round, steal or lie  
Keep yr hands &Ilz off wot isnt yrs

(from a compation 2 upd8 txts frm d bibl on ship-offools.com, ed. Simon Jenkins)

And modern Shakespeare

2 B or not 2 B; dat is d Q wethR tis nObla n d mInd 2  
sufR D slings & arOs v outrAjus 4tUn 2 tAk arms  
against a C v trubls & bl opOzing end dem? 2 dI, 2  
SlEp n mo; & bl a slEp 2 sA we end d hRt-Ak & d  
1000 natUrLshox dat flesh is eir 2

Like telegrafese, TXTMSG spelling may be superseded by progress. You can now enter first letters of words on mobile phones that calculate probabilities, guess what you mean

and send off the complete message. TXT adepts can still go faster with SMS fonetic spelling at their thumb-tips rather than hesitating to think of first letters, but even if the efflorescence of their DIY spelling turns out to be short, they have shown how easily tradspell can be abandoned when hides are not bound.

Words without spelling – letters used as words

KISS can mean 'Keep it simple, stupid' or 'Knowledgebased Interactive Signal-monitoring System'.

The shortest possible spelling uses just one letter per word. Acronyms made from initial letters are now the spelling equivalent of Orwell's Newspeak. They can be rude, as in TXTMSGs – SOB, BF, GTH, WDYTYAFF. They can become real words with their origins forgotten – for example, radar – radio detection and ranging, and laser – light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation. They can convey messages like RSVP, E & OE. They can even summarise philosophies, like QED and WYSIWYG and the tragic ISAGIATT – it seemed a good idea at the time. Bureaucrats, government agencies, NGOs and CEOs love acronyms. They like the antisocial bonus of confusion when they keep changing the names, and make organisations hard to find in telephone books, and require new letterheads, thus increasing useless employment. An Australian Federal education department called DE took only a few ministries to become DEE, then DEET, then DEETYA, then DEST. An English Studies authority zoomed from VISE to VICAB to VBOS to VCAA, leaving a trail of discarded stationery. Contract typists were required to write to them. One Victorian government environmental department was eventually known as the Department of Continual Name Changes. The

Science Education in the UK 1988  
Primary School Initiatives in Science and Technology  
A memorandum  
to all Primary School Establishments  
Northamptonshire Education Committee



Following the introduction of new initiatives such as TVEI, SSCR, INSET, SCSST, GRIST, etc. into the Secondary Curriculum, it is time to explain to you some of the Primary Initiatives which I as your CEO consider implementing.

At the centre is Curriculum and Home Advanced Organisations Systems, CHAOS, for close links between home and the school curriculum. CHAOS responds to recent HMI and LEA guidelines on Primary School Science and Technology – PSST. It encourages Curricular Home Advanced Organisation of Technological Inter-disciplinary Conceptual (CHAOTIC) experiences.

Teachers With Inservice Technical Training – TWITT – will be known as TWITTS. Following an intensive two-day course, participants will be in a position to introduce CHAOS into the schools. TWITTS training is undertaken by Inservice Dedicated Instructors of Technology (IDIOTS). The first task of the IDIOT is to Co-Opt Nominated (CON) teachers in schools to be coordinators. To sustain the initiative, more Resources Orientated Technology (ROT) is required, to be funded by Ministerial Inservice Support of Educational Resources (MISER). Parent-Related Advisory Technologists, known as PRATS, will be recruited to spread the message.

In summary, CHAOS is dependent upon MISER providing IDIOTS with sufficient ROT in order to CON teachers into the role of being TWITTS. PRATS will ensure home/school liaison and that the educational service will become CHAOTIC. The entire initiative is to be known as Curriculum Orientated Basic Bi-Partisan Lessons to Encourage Revisions in Science – COBBLERS.

The future looks promising. A working party entitled Teachers and Workers Investigation of Technology, Children and Homes – TWITCH – is soon to report. PSST looks set to play an increasing role in the CHAOS in our primary schools.

UN has a department busy about acronyms; I think it is called UNESCO.

Cryonics is storing a dead body at below freezing point in the hope some future technology will enliven it. Some acronyms could be called acryonyms.

The previous page shows a British document circulated anonymously in the 1980s by teachers furious at secondary education initiatives named TVEI, SSCR, INSET, SCSST and

GRIST.

Words without spelling

Friendship Happiness Fortune Prosperity

Can you read Chinese? But, hey, count how many words you, you clever person, can read without spelling! You may not even know the words for the icons and logos that you read daily on your computer, car dashboard or electrical circuits. There are hundreds of international pictograms. Visual literacy, huh?

These are a bit harder.

Chinese can cross languages. Systems of picture-writing

such as the Australian Blissymbols can help people with severe language difficulties. However, alfabet letters are easier for coding and decoding new words, especially for ideas and grammar. Try putting that last sentence into pictograms. The disadvantage of an alphabetic spelling is when it defeats its own purpose by being made hard to learn.

Funny biznis – Spel'n 'n a Biskit

It may be because they are so familiar with advertising spellings that young people have latched so quickly on to TXTMSG spelling. They apply principles they have already absorbed.

Advertising cries 'Look at moi!' by breaking social, moral and spelling rules. Biznis misspellings are aimed at wide mass markets and a low level of reading ability, and to stand out as hurrying shoppers glance along supermarket shelves. Seventy per cent of biznis re-spellings are shorter so they can be faster to read. Their spelling is closer to

everyday speech, and cuts out unnecessary letters, unless they want to look deliberately Ye Olde Worlde Shoppee or TweeKiddee Nappee. And so: they give us: BluTak, Buf-Puf, Flothru, Glu Stik, Gro-Plus, Hi-Spread, NuBrik, Quikshu, Playskool and Tru-Valu. (Legal note: real brand-names here may be  
TM

, # or 1. Regard their presence here as free advertising.)

But advertising spellings develop unsystematically, like other English spellings, through lack of a common reference point. Easy can be spelled ezi, eze, ezee and easi. Look out for these spellings as the trend gathers pace: booteek! (Eek!), bedNbrekfst, lybri, hitek, barba, greengrosa, menzcloze, rayway stayshn, longzheray, postofis, turistinfo, jenuwin anteeks, habadasha, supamarket, ionmunga, garij, takawa, cofishop, swimnbarz, jimnazhum and sitisenta. Sinfl Sinny! fun'n Lun'n! Stop it! If u drink and spel, ura bluddy ijut!

## How to invent Advertising Spellings

- . Simple vowels: Supa, Sola, Blu, Glu, Shu, Uneeda, Flo, Lo, Glo, Brite, Lite, Spreds,
- . One letter replaces two: Kwik, Buz, Biskit, Elektrix, Brix, Sox, Klix, Trix, Fotek
- . Single letters as syllables: Met-L, Brit-R, Ris-N, Chikn, Vandlshield
- . When brand-names rhyme they usually have matching spellings like Ritelite, Buf Puf, Biskit, Froot Loops, Kix For Kidz, and Tru Valu. but they can make a contrast: True Bloo, Hi-Rise, Hy-Fibe, Twilite, Ski Lite, Fotograffiti, Speediklean, Crazy Nails, Ezy Seal

In the very shrine of education called Edbiz, even literacy kits can abandon the spelling they teach, with names like RediGuide and SpellPak.

ScIambred SlepnIlg – the cosmic mess

In September 2003, an email magsese ran like wlid-frie round the world:

RDIAENG Aoccdrnig to a rscheear at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe. Sdnous lkie smoe lgnisiuctis gard sdnetut has jsut been hdnaed a gaert tihses tpioc. Ceehiro.

Bloggers sprouted like moorshums. Surfers googled into 'Elingsh uinervtisy' and newspaper columns ran hot. A Brazilian in Germany complained that 'in 9 days time i got this 3 times in the english version, 5 times in the portuguese version, 10 times in the german version and wunse eeven in Icelandic.'

Erveyone was ectexid because it looked as if it might not matter how you spelled as long as the first and last letters were right. Some thought it meant that words were read as whole word-shapes. No more need to learn spelling!

Even scrambled letters might not be needed, if you could work out a message like this:

A———g to a r———r at an E——h u——y, it d——  
n't m——r in w-t o—r the letters s in a w-d are, the o—  
y i——t t—g is t-t f—t and l-t l——r is at the r——t p—  
e.

A third leader in The Times (23 September 2003) announced:

Taht ptus piad to the shcool oof thuoght that we raed lteter by letetr. It sgugests insetad taht our barins pratcise a more sophistciated from of ptatern recogintion with wrods, maknig it poitnless to work too hrad at odrering eevry letetr crroectly . . . It wlil strike trreor into the haerts of eidtors aruond the ltierary wolrd . . . What does the ftuure hlod for these domoed suols, if spleing has smiply sotpped mattenirg?

Stop. Nothing about spelling is as simple as that.

My computer's spell-checker can work out all except 8 of the 83 scrambled words in the paragraph that started all this. It was stumped only by rscheear, Elingsh, uinervtisy, iprmoetnt, pclae, wouthit, bcuseae and ervey. My computer obviously does not read words as whole shapes. It takes the letters on board and sorts them until it gets some genuine words. Like devotees of Scrabble™ and anagrams. Writers work like this too, with a several-stage process, so that when they type very fast their fingers can be faster than their brains. It is like thinking, when ideas come in a stream of consciousness, and then have to be sorted out and grammar applied to write or speak them.

The cataracts of Internet interest about Smiple Snellpig were joined by linguists and psychologists. They posted emails about entropy, frequency, compression, indexes of displacement, lexical decision tasks, Coltheart's Dual-Route Cascaded Model, the MROM-p syntax, neighbourhood effects and the application of Zipf's Law. The last word came from one learned blogger: 'I love this stuff ! holy crap. this is the best shit since sliced meat'.

A moral may need seclusion in a brown paper envelope. This one is in italics instead. Since skilled readers can read these jumbled spellings, how easily they could read spelling that was easier for poor readers and spellers.

### Spelling and technology

The old information technology is spelling, but it is static. The language itself changes, and the new information technology changes all the time. Once scientists hoped that computers could learn to spell, but then it was found that spelling was one thing they still could not do, at least not in English. At Stanford University, computers were fed with hundreds of spelling rules, but all their algorithms were stymied by so many exceptions. So it looked as if English spelling might have to modify its irregular spellings so that computers could spell. (This would have helped humans too.) Unfortunately, scientists then came up with the spell-checker, which is simply a big database, so after all, English

spelling did not have to improve so that computers could spell.

When spell-checkers succeed

Few humans among us can spell every word they know, but a computer can have an enormous memory-bank, and allow a little latitude, so that it can work out what words are close to your mistakes. My spell-checker prefers show but it does not mind shewn. It doesn't mind today or to-day, tomorrow or to-morrow. It will not flag me for faster spellings like bandana, cutlas, encyclopedia, fulfil, jail, lanolin, monolog, omelet, paraffin, toxin, trolley or wagon. And so, by allowing spelling alternatives, computers help to change the world.

When spell-checkers fail

A letter in the London Independent newspaper voiced a common belief that we can 'rely on a spell-checker to deal with spelling problems, give or take a few homophones. Perhaps then these periodic calls for spelling reform will stop, and schools can concentrate on improving children's skills of composition – much more important and more difficult than spelling in the long run'. But spell-checkers can do funny things. Here are words my spell-checker comes up with: standley, webfeet, potentillas, unwigged, emboli, anuline and seabag or teaberry. But it rejects standby, website, potentials, unwaged, email, online and teabag. My spell-checker does not recognise Shakespeare or spellchecker, but can make strange suggestions to re-spell typos – murre, bushies, bushoos, donee, amulla, whicker, amole, buttony, bottley, donk, chlordane, serape, baccate, quokkas, phellagen, comestible and baccate. It suggests printout when I want printout. Amaze your friends. Collect your own spell-check phenomena to use in your next Scrabble™ game.

Type in the names of politicians, celebrities or places and see what your spell-checker thinks of them. Hitler becomes Hitter, and Cromwell is Crookwell. And who are Sadism, Dooby, Condoles, Admass, Omasa, Ararat and Blip? Who are the well-known Australians Costal, Braces,

Doily, Creak, Basely, Mingle, Emerge, Lounge, Warn and  
Faugh?

A spell-checker for everyone in the world may not be the  
answer to poor literacy. As emailer Mrs Hadler wrote: 'with  
spell-checkers, changing the spelling is unec . . . unnec . . .  
Well, there's no point, is there?' Well, she thinks:

Awl thou this whirred processing soft wear has a spelling  
cheque facility, ewe should not putt two match faith inn it.  
Their are sum things it can cheque and sum it Cannes knot.  
Four egg sample this paragraph had know treble hat awl in  
getting threw it, butt it wood bee risk key to assume that big  
horse yore letter got threw the spell chequer it must be  
correct! It cud caws ewe to leaf a whirred inn witch yew mite  
have spotted if ewe had red it properly in the furs plaice. The  
mane thing is too yews it as Anne aid, butt knot two mutch.

A long poem by Jerrold H. Zar constantly goes round the  
world on emails. Here are six verses:

Entry for a Pullet Surprise

I have a spelling checker,  
It came with my PC.  
It plane lee marks four my revue  
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.  
Eye ran this poem threw it,  
Your sure reel glad two no.  
Its vary polished in it's weigh.  
My checker tolled me sew.  
Each frays come posed up on my screen  
Eye trussed too bee a joule.  
The checker pours o'er every word  
To cheque sum spelling rule.  
Bee fore a veiling checker's  
Hour spelling mite decline,  
And if we're lacks oar have a laps,

We wood bee maid too wine.  
Butt now bee caws my spelling  
Is checked with such grate flare,  
Their are know fault's with in my cite,  
Of nun eye am a wear.

Sow ewe can sea why aye dew prays  
Such soft wear four pea seas,  
And why eye brake in two averse  
Buy righting wan too pleas.

## Geography

Spelling enshrines our culture. But what culture? There are so many Englishes now – Caribbean, Pacific, Indian, African . . . Literatures are now written in burgeoning Englishes that are studied by linguists. Less recognised is the possibility that many English spellings could go with them.

However, some distinctive ways of spelling English are trying to emerge.

### The American way of spelling

Spanish flu, Dutch courage, Scotch broth, German measles and English spelling have been blamed on specific nations. The USA has been edgy about the last one. A US spelling authority, Dr Richard Venezky, asserts that The American Way of Spelling is now the dominant English in the world. We can expect that the American way of spelling will follow free trade agreements across the globe. Several hundred words are spelled differently. And so there are separate dictionaries, spell-checkers and editions of books on the two sides of the Atlantic. However, nothing else is changed by the seven principles for American spelling set out by Venezky in 1999. Rules and history are peppered with phrases like 'once again long exception lists are needed'. Learning the early stages of American spelling takes 17 pages to set out, 'where mainly the simpler patterns . . . are introduced'. It may require 'two or three years' to learn 100 patterns that 'should be taught explicitly'. We could feel like Dante being escorted by Virgil around the perimeter of spelling purgatory.

Thank you, America, for spellings like theater, center, program, catalog, honor and color, and occasionally, thru



and tho. Otherwise, the American way of spelling is as English as ever.

### Dialect spelling

The genre of stories in dialect was once full of apostrophes: 'Yoo 'avn't 'eard wot woz a'goin' ter 'appen darn 'n t' flamin' 'olly 'n hivey bits o' owld 'Arvie's 'amlet, yeers a'gone, 'ave yer?' Uncle Remus and Artemus Ward used spelling to comic effect in representing the lower classes. Writers rarely did this to their own accents. Today the yoo, yor, wot, wos, wen and yeers of how they spelled sub-English are pretty much how most of us speak. But they have been so indelibly labelled as 'Vulgar, my deah' that we would not dare to use them to spell as we speak.

### Scots spelling

Most Scots spell in English, except when Scottish spelling gives a flavour to the Lallans of Lowland Scots. We don't sing Old Long Since instead of Auld Lang Syne. Gang hame tae speir yon puir gudewyf is still the stuff of ballad and lifts the sperrit as long as it is not thick with apostrophes.

Curiously, Scots numerals show where some misleading English spellings hae coom frae – ane, twa, thri (with thrid for our third), fower, fyf, six, seven, echt, nine, ten, eleven, twalf – and twenty as a vague and expansive term meaning 'plenty', like the Hebrew word for 'forty'.

Lallans words strayed in many varieties because the spelling was not shepherded by dictionaries. There are at least eight Scots words with their spellings that are cousins and second cousins of gooseberry. Scots have the most multi-spelled surnames in English. And every spelling of McKie is for its owners the real MacCay.

It would be a pity if the Scots' couthy pawky kenspeckled multi-spelled vocabulary disappears. It chronicles an inimitable and observant culture, unlike current spoken English that is so often homogenised into sort of like, stuff. Here is a sample of Scottish adjectives to be chewed slowly: grimly, grewsome, grippit, grisk, grobble, groff, groo, groogle, groose, groosh (excellent), grooze, groozle, gropsey

(gluttonous), gropus (stupid), grou, grouble, grouf, rouff, grouch, grounge, grouse, grousome, grousy, growe, growble, gribble (to feel with the fingers), gromish (to crush severely parts of the body), and grimes-dike (a ditch made by magic).

#### Pidgin spellings

Pidgin Englishes are a mix of English and local languages, so simple that anyone can savvy quicksmart. Pidgin spelling by English writers used to be based on conventional spellings of the original English words. They cluttered it with apostrophes and vowels that made pidgin languages look uncouth and linguistically inferior, and pidgin speakers more than slightly idiot-comic.

Pidgin spellings today are simple, and easy for anyone to read or write. This accessible spelling has been a big reason why places like Papua Niugini, with over 800 different languages and needing a lingua franca to link the nation, came to prefer an English-Melanesian pidgin like Tok Pisin that everyone could learn easily, to the original intentions on independence to continue with English alone in education and government, in order to join fully with the international world. English spelling has been just too hard.

Even insular Anglos with not a word of the spoken language can read much of Tok Pisin – Gavman, Palamen, Praim Minista, Dipartmen Pramerai Industri, Nesenel Brotkasting Komisi, Asosiet Pres, Provinsal Seketeri, Nius Sevis Waia, Bisnis Kampani, Spesel Operata, Eksekyutiv Opis and Komyuniti Projek. Any English kampan against gobildiguk could also re-import their handy expression bagarup.

#### Spelling for an Australian Aboriginal creole

Roper River Creole was first developed for local indigenous education by white Australians in the 1970s, and then increasingly by Aboriginal speakers. The creole spelling looks like a language of its own, because ethnic identity was regarded as more important for the locals than wider communication. A writer's distance from English-speaking centres can be judged by the changes in words – sleep

becomes slip, then silip, jilip and jilib, and snake becomes sneik, then sineik, sinek and jinek.

A story about two childless bandicoots begins like this, in the old-style spelling of 'pidgin English'.

Well, long another country, all the bandicoot been sit-down. Him and him wife been no-good-binjei too-much two-fellow no-more been have-him piccaninny. One-day two-fellow been listen gammon kangaroo been have-him-lot-of piccaninny. Two-fellow been have-to go long kangaroo belong ask-him kangaroo belong two-fellow piccaninny.

Roper River Creole spelling has more dignity. It also uses 25% less paper:

Wel, langa naja kantri, ola Bendigut bin jidan. Im en im waif bin nogudbinji dumaji tubala nomo bin abum biginini. Wandei tubala bin lisen geman keingurru bin abum loda biginini. Tubala bin labda go  
langa keingurru bala  
askim keingurru blanga  
tubala bibinini. (from a report of the Summer Institute of Linguistics)

#### Urban Australian

Aboriginal 'Koories' are showing the first signs of a distinct spelling with a Koori Kolej and a play called Bran Nue Dae. White Australian English does not have an official spelling, which is just as well, because it could be unintelligible beyond Australian shores. In 'Strine', spelling-as-we-speak, aorta is what the govmin should be doing, Gloria Soames is where we all want to live, and a namsemmitch will do us for summanareet. A classic handbook, Let Stalk Strine, by Alfabeck Lauder, was inspired by an incident when the British author Monica Dickens innocently inscribed Emma Chizzit in a book for an Australian who was only asking the price.

A recent import into Australian English is officially spelled ciao, but you may see it written as caoi or coia or,

desperately, chow.

### Black spelling

Spelling rebellion in Black America is rising, not only in gangsta rap. It should be watched, because black culture tends to percolate into the white mainstream. These lines are by the activist Linton Kwesi Johnson:

how lang yu really feel yu coulda keep wi andah  
heel wen di trute done reveal it is noh mistri wi  
mekkin histri it is noh mistri wi winnin victri.

Creative spelling is no longer just what children do before they know any better.

The world spells back

They spell it Vinci and they pronounce it Vinchy; foreigners always spell better than they pronounce.

(Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, 1869)

The English words pouring into foreign languages are usually re-spelled in forms such as Franglais, Russlish, Spanglish, Punglish (Punjabi), Japlish or Janglish, and mixes that Paul Jennings has labelled 'Minglish'. Taksi, cofi, soka, bifstek, futbol, iscrem, mashin, komputa, niuspapa and pasport are internationally recognised vocabulary.

Danish spelling is not systematic, and so 'Danglish' uses English spellings for computer, juice, quiz, sweater and yacht, but simplifies them in boycott, cricket, foto and bulldog, and has hybrids like booking-kontor.

Deutschlish is liable to change the sense of English words, as in product names such as children's lavatory seats labelled Happy End and Baby Sitter.

Dutchling can keep English spellings for newer imported words, as in this extract from a Dutch newspaper:

Kijk, de missiles zitten in roterende magazines, zij zijn daar in geladen via de strike down hatches. Zij liggen op een ready-service ring in ready-service trays, worden hydraulic mhoog gebracht, nadat de magazinedoors zijn open geklapt, worden danop de tilting rail gezet. (Cited Gerritsen 1986)

Finnish, as may be expected, makes long words even longer, as in *Electronimikroskooppi*.

Franglais is considered treasonable by the French Academy. Even the Paris Opera was fined for unpatriotic words like filter cigarettes instead of cigarettes *filtrees*. Fines have been levied for hamburger, big cheese and Irish coffee. Other borrowings include campings, le baby, sandwich, weekend, data bank, barbecue, batch processing, chewing gum, fast-food, hardware, hot-dog, juke-box, popcorn, software and walkman. But even when it is given French spellings, Franglais is never regarded as Frenchified enough: *bifstek*, *boulingrin* (bowling green), *pipele footing* (walking), *le futbol*, *nitklub*, *le kartingle*, *redingote* (riding coat), *stoque* (stock), *un dancing* (dance hall), *unpeeling*, *un smoking* and *fondashon* (foundation cream).

Indonglish is growing. Seventy per cent of the vocabulary in an Indonesian picture book was recognisably English with Indonesian spelling. Only words for relationships, behaviour and the grammar remained 100% local. So Indonesians have *alkohol*, *dokter*, *stetoskop*, *foto*, *gitar*, *koboi* (cowboy), *mikrofon*, *sekretaris*, *studio* and *trompet*.

Japlish (*gairaigo* – language from abroad) is written in the roman alphabet or in katakana script which can represent only Japanese speech sounds and language structure – so classic becomes *kurashikkus*, and Japlish words *fairu*, *erebeta*, *ragubi*, *rabureta*, *tishatsu*, *rakkisebun*, *uisuki on za rokku*, *wapuro*, *hitto endo ran* and *hai teinzu* represent file, elevator, rugby, love-letter, T-shirt, lucky seven, whisky on the rocks, word-processor, hit and run and older teenagers.

Portuguese usually re-spells its loan words, as in *lider*, *caboi*, *rosbife* and *draubaques* for leader, cowboy, roast beef and drawbacks. Examples of Spanglish and Texmex include *antifris*, *crismas*, *cauboi*, *detur*, *friser*, *aiscrim*, *picop ticher* and *roquirol* (pickup truck and rock and roll).

In South-East Asia, English spelling is usually copied carefully, but English language makes trendy decorations in shop signs and mottoes on note-paper. 'May all the happiness and gladness found you from this moment And spacess between us . . .' and 'You're always on my mine I'll

be the until end of time’.

The international spelling of English A–Z in case you want to know:

Afrikaans – Engel, Albanian – Anglisht, Arabic – Alingli’zia,  
Bengali – Engreji, Breton – Saozneg Catalan – Angle`s, Croatian  
– engleski, Czech – anglicky Danish – engelsk, Dutch – Engels  
Esperanto – la anglan, Estonian – inglise Finnish – englantia,  
French – anglais German –Englisch Hawaiian – Pelekane,  
Hebrew – anglit, Hindi – angrejii, Hungarian – Angolul  
Icelandic – Ensku, Indonesian – Bahasa Inggris, Irish – Be« arla,  
Italian – Inglese Korean – Yong-o Latin – Anglice Malaysian –  
Bahasa Inggeris, Mandarin – yi-ng yuv. Norwegian – engelsk  
Polish – po angielsku, Portuguese – ingle`s, Brazilian  
Portuguese – Ingle`s Romanian – engleza Serbian– engleski,  
Sesotho – Senyese mane, Slovak – anglicky, Slovenian –  
anglesxko, Spanish – ingle«s, Swahili – Kiingereza, Swedish –  
Engelska Tagalog – Ingles, Thai – pa-sa-ang-krit, Turkish –  
Ingilizce Ukrainian – po anhliy’s’ky Vietnamese – Anh Zulu –  
isiNgisi

(Source: [www.travlang.com](http://www.travlang.com))

### International spellings for English

Schemes to improve English spelling have been offered to the ungrateful Anglos by Russians, French, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Greeks, Israelis, Japanese, Venezuelans, Germans, Indians and especially, for some reason, Swedes. I have corresponded with many of them. Schemes usually show their origins. A high-school teacher in Ganzou, Jiangxe province, Mr Peh-ling Lee, has worked out a Chinese way of spelling English, in which ‘l’ and ‘r’ are the same letter. Who knows? China has the numbers to eventually prevail.

Eurospelling ELFE stands for English Lingua Franca in Europe. EuroEnglish is becoming a new English pidgin within the European Union for informal communication between nationals who speak other languages. They are now abandoning grammatical niceties that ‘drive people crazy’ when learning English, when they find that they do

not actually need gerunds or articles. ELFE English spelling may follow. Indeed, a dramatic news item that flew around the Internet in May 2001 has been so immensely popular that it is still flying:

#### EURO ENGLISH GETTING BETTER!

The European Commission has just announced an agreement whereby English will be the official language of the EU rather than German, which was the other possibility. Her Majesty's government conceded that English spelling had some room for improvement and has accepted a five-year phase-in plan to be known as EuroEnglish.

In the first year 's' replaces soft 'c'. This will make the sivil servants jump with joy. Hard 'c' will be dropped in favor of 'k'. This should klear up konfursion and keyboards kan have one less letter.

There will be more publik enthusiasm in the sekond year, when the troublesome 'ph' is replaced with 'f'. Words like Fotograf will be 20% shorter.

In the 3rd year, publik akseptanse of the new spelling kan be expekted to reach the stage when more komplikated changes are possible. Governments will enkorage the removal of double letters, which have always ben a deterrent to akurate speling. Also, al wil agre that the horrible mess of the silent 'e's is disgraceful, and they should go away.

By the 4th yar, pepl wil be reseptiv to replasing 'th' with 'z', and 'w' with 'v'.

During ze fifz yar, ze unesary 'o' kan be dropd from vords kontaining 'ou' and similar changes vud of kors be aplid to ozer kombinations of leters.

After zis fifz yar, ve vil hav a reli sensibl riten styl. Zer vil be no mor trubls or difikultis and evrivun vil find it ezi tu understand ech ozer.

**ZE DREM VIL FINALI KUM TRU!!**

That is, EuroEnglish will be spelled like German. The French will then retaliate.

Ze« do Rock is a cosmopolitan in Germany who has

invented a jokey world Winglish: 'World English givs u wings! Anglo-saxon words ar speld az dei ar pronaunst, but Latin and greek, french, etc. words ar pronounced az thay ar ritten'. By the time Ze«'s Winglish reaches its fifth year of introduction, it looks like this: 'After dis fift yir, wi wil hav a rili sensible ritien stail. Der wil bi nou mor trubles or dificultis and evriwan wil faind it izi tu understand iich oder.

DE DRIM WIL FINALI COM TRU!

Ze« is now developing Winglish into an International Pidgin. He has also written an adventure book in Siegfriedisch, a 'purely germanic german' where a word like bus becomes Vieleleutewagen (manypeoplecar).

Reders ar encurajd to come up with their own dremms or spoofs for Pinglish (Personalised English Spelling).

A dated history of spelling

(History was once all dates.)

AD 900	an incantation
1400	to read letter by letter
1580	a heavy influence
1595	a relief shift
1625	to spell as a verb
1700	producing magic
1810	spellbind
1870	a period of time, as in dry spell
1870	a speller is someone who spells out words
1870	illness, as in fainting spell
1875	spelling bees were already a form of trial for public entertainment
1935	spellbinding, what films tried to be
1940	spell out, as in making instructions clear
1950	spelldown, what you do in a spelling bee

Spelt is also a kind of wheat.



If we really wanted to avoid words that sound the same being spelled the same, we could spell each meaning differently.

#### A pocket history of spelling

Talking is natural, although it takes eight years or more to be even moderately expert. Everyone learns to talk unless something goes wrong. Writing is not natural. It was invented for a few languages, then others copied it. The idea of the alphabet is that letters represent sounds, and is so clever that it has been invented only a few times. It is easier to learn to read and write with 15 to 50 alphabet letters than to rote-learn thousands of characters. The Phoenicians used a consonant alphabet for trading, and then the Greeks added vowels. Writing with single characters for syllables is easier still, but the English language has too many different syllables for this.

As linguistics professor Vivian Cook and many others before him have pointed out, an unfair number of 'correct' English spellings began life as mistakes.

English spelling began with an Anglo-Saxon script that was submerged by the Norman-French conquest of 1066. When the English language re-surfaced in writing, it had become mongrel English-French. Printing helped to stabilise its spelling in the 15th century, but printers and scholars were like too many cooks. The revival of learning set off a vocabulary explosion, with much derived from Latin and Greek. Scholars tried to make English words look as if they came from the classics too, so now there were three spoons in the pudding. Johnson's Dictionary of 1755 and Webster's in America later set standards for spelling. Both men were reformers in their way but Webster moderated his radical aims, and Johnson tried to base spelling on presumed derivations of words because there was then no prestige English dialect to follow. The British Empire next trawled in vocabulary and spellings from all over the world. 'Correct' spelling came to serve as a quick screening test for privilege, diligence, intelligence and even moral virtue for 18th

century aristocrats and Victorian middle-classes, to keep out the aspiring vulgar mobs. The Swedish sociologist, Thorsten Veblen, in 1899 described English spelling as an example of 'Conspicuous Consumption' that elites use to show off their status, and it is still pretty much that way. The result from all this burden of history is that many words are hard to spell, and many are hard to read too. We have bad spellers, but many more poor readers and failed readers.

However, TXTMSGs and the Internet show that winds of spelling change are blowing in places where the young do not fear to tread.

## Spelling in literature

From Charles Dickens. Nicholas Nickleby comes to teach at Dotheboys Hall, under headmaster Wackford Squeers:

Half-a-dozen scarecrows, out at knees and elbows, ranged themselves in front of the schoolmaster's desk. One placed a torn and filthy book beneath his learned eye.

'This is the first class in English spelling and phi

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losophy, Nickleby,' said Squeers. 'We'll get up a Latin one, and hand that over to you. Now, then, where's the first boy?'

'Please, sir, he's cleaning the back parlour window,' said the head of the philosophical class.

'So he is, to be sure,' rejoined Squeers. 'We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of the book, he goes and does it. It's just the same principle as the use of the globes. Where's the second boy?'

'Please, sir, he's weeding the garden,' replied a small voice.

'To be sure,' said Squeers. 'So he is. B-o-t, bot, ti-n, tin, bottin n-e-y, ney, bottiney, noun substantive, a

knowledge of plants. When he has learned that bottinney means a knowledge of plants, he goes and knows 'em. That's our system, Nickleby; what do you think of it?'

'It's a very useful one, at any rate,' answered Nicholas.

### An old-time American spelling bee

From *Laddie*, by Gene Stratton Porter, published in 1915. Everyone in the district has crammed into the schoolhouse for the great event. The two finalists are the romantic leads – Laddie, the heroic big brother of the child narrator, and the 'Princess', the beautiful daughter of a strange English couple who are shunned by everyone, but who of course turn out to be of noble blood.

Miss Amelia began with McGuffey's spelling book, and whenever some unfortunate made a bad break the crowd roared with laughter. Peter Justice was nodding on his feet, so she pronounced 'sleepy' to him. Someone nudged Pete and he waked up and spelled it, s-l-e, sle, p-e, pe, and it made everyone laugh. Isaac Thomas spelled soap s-o-a-p-e, and it was all the funnier that he couldn't spell it, for from his looks you could tell that he had no acquaintance with it in any shape. Then Miss Amelia gave out 'marriage' to the spooniest young man in the district and 'coquette' to our Shelley, who had been making sheep's eyes at Johnny Myers. When she had trimmed the lines to half a dozen on each side she pronounced the hardest words she could find and the spellers caught them up and rattled them off like machines. 'Incompatibility,' she gave out, and before the sound of her voice died away the Princess was spelling: 'I-n, in, c-o-m, com, incom, p-a-t, pat, incompat, i, incompati, b-i-l bil, incompatibil, i, incompatibili, t-y, ty, incompatibility.'

Then Laddie spelled incomprehensibility, and they finished up the 'abilities' and the 'alities' with a rush, and changed McGuffey's for Webster, with five on Laddie's side and three on the Princess's, and when they quit with it, the Princess was alone, and Laddie facing her. From then on you could call it real

spelling. They spelled from the grammars, hyperbole, synechdoche, and epizeuxis. They spelled from the physiology, chlorophyll, coccyx arytoid, and the names of the bones and nerves, and all the hard words inside you. They tried the diseases and spelled jaundice, neurasthenia and tongue-tied. They tried all the occupations and professions, and went through the stores and spelled all sorts of hardware, china and dry goods. Laddie's side kept crying, 'Hold up the glory of the district!'

The Princess was poised lightly on her feet, her thick curls shining in the light; her eyes like stars, her perfect, dark oval face flushed a rich red, and her deep bosom rising and falling with excitement. Laddie, in his strength and manly beauty, trembled before the Princess. Heavens, how they spelled! They finished all the words I ever heard and spelled like lightning through a lot of others the meaning of which I couldn't imagine. Father never gave them out at home. They spelled epiphany, gaberdine, ichthyology, gewgaw, kaleidoscope, and troubadour. Then Laddie spelled one word two different ways, and the Princess went him one better, for she spelled another three.

They spelled from the Bible, Nebuchadnezzar, Potiphar, Peleg, Belshazzar, Abimelech, and a host of others I never heard the minister preach about. Then they did the most dreadful thing of all. 'Broom,' pronounced the teacher, and I began mentally, b-r-o-o-m, but Laddie spelled 'b-r-o-u-gh-a-m', and I stared at him in a daze. A second later Miss Amelia gave out 'Beecham' to the Princess, and again I tried it, b-e-e-c-h, but the Princess was spelling B-e-a-u-c-h-a-m-p, and I almost fell from the window.

Miss Amelia at last picked up an old geography. Father often did that, so Laddie was safe there. Miss Amelia pronounced Terra del Fuego to the Princess. 'T-e-r-r-a, Terra: d-e-l, del, F-i-e-u-g-o,' spelled the Princess, and sat down suddenly in the midst of a mighty groan from her side. 'Next!' called Miss Amelia. 'T-e-r-r-a, Terra, d-e-l, del, F-e-u-g-o,' spelled Laddie.

'Wrong!' wailed Miss Amelia, and our side breathed one big groan. Then everyone laughed and pretended they didn't care, and the Princess came over and shook hands with Laddie, and Laddie said to Miss Amelia, 'Just let me take that book a minute until I see how the thing really does go.' I had heard him spell it many, many times for father, he didn't fool me.

An excerpt from Mark Twain's Simplified spelling in

ancient Egypt:

The first time I was in Egypt a Simplified Spelling epidemic had broken out. This was four or five thousand years ago – I do not remember just how many thousand it was. I am speaking of a former state of existence of mine, perhaps my earliest reincarnation; indeed I think it was the earliest.

The Simplifiers had risen in revolt against the hieroglyphics. An uncle of Cadmus was trying to introduce the alphabet. He was challenged to show cause. The discussion took place in the Temple of Astarte. Croesus was foreman of the Simplifiers' Revolt. Among the Simplifiers were many men of learning and distinction, but all grades of intellect, erudition, and ignorance were represented in the Opposition.

Uncle Cadmus began with an object lesson, with chalk, on a couple of blackboards. On one of them he drew in outline a slender Egyptian in a short skirt, with slim legs and an eagle's head in place of a proper head, and carrying a couple of dinner pails, one in each hand. In front he drew a toothed line like an excerpt from a saw; three skeleton birds of doubtful ornithological origin; a partly constructed house, with lean Egyptians fetching materials in wheelbarrows; some more unclassified birds; then a large king, with carpenter's shavings for whiskers; next another king jabbing at a lion with a javelin; a tower, with armed Egyptians projecting out of the top as crowded as the cork in a bottle; and the opposing army below, fierce of aspect but much out of drawing as regards to perspective. They were shooting arrows at the men in the tower, which was poor military judgement because they could have reached up and pulled them out by the scruff of the neck. He followed these pictures with line after line of birds and beasts and scraps of saw-teeth and bunches of men in short frocks, and finally his great blackboard was full from top to bottom. Everybody recognized the invocation set out by the symbols: it was the Lord's Prayer. It had taken him forty-five minutes.

Then he stepped to the other blackboard and dashed off 'Our Father which art in heaven,' and the rest of it, in graceful Italian script, spelling the words, and finished it in four minutes and a half.

He went to a fresh blackboard and wrote upon it in

hieroglyphics – ‘At this time the King possessed of cavalry 214,580 men and 222,631 horses for their use; of infantry 16,341 squadrons together with an emergency reserve of all arms, consisting of 84,946 men, 321 elephants, 37,264 transportation carts, and 28,954 camels and dromedaries.’

It filled the board and cost him twenty-six minutes of time and labor. Then he repeated it on another blackboard in Italian script and Arabic numerals in two minutes and a quarter. Then he said:

‘You have spent your lives in mastering the hieroglyphics, and to you they are simple. It would not be worth your while to acquire the new learning; the pictured records have become beautiful to you through habit, and are associated with the great deeds of our fathers, indestructively engraved upon stone. But I appeal to you in behalf of the generations to follow you. Do not send them toiling down to the twentieth century still oppressed by this heavy burden. Let your sons and daughters adopt written words and the alphabet, and go free.’ (Uncle Cadmus then made a withering comparison of German and English spelling, and set out Mark Twain’s own ideas about improving English.)

Uncle Cadmus sat down. The Opposition rose and combated his reasonings in the usual way. They had always been used to the hieroglyphics. The hieroglyphics had dear and sacred associations for them. They loved to sit on a barrel under an umbrella in the brilliant sun of Egypt and spell out the owls and eagles and alligators and saw-teeth, and take an hour and a half to the Lord’s Prayer, and weep with romantic emotion at the thought that they had at most but eight or ten years between themselves and the grave to enjoy this ecstasy.

### Spelling by numbers

Numeric Reform in Nescioubia is a parable by Charles Grandgent, telling of an ancient country that used Roman numerals. Many mathematicians admitted the Arabic system was better, but said that it could not apply to Nescioubian problems. Others thought the change might be advantageous, but it should come about spontaneously, without pressure from any self-constituted body. The Arabic numerals, apparently, were to silently steal in without anybody noticing them. Others conceded that

change might be assisted by conscious effort on somebody's part (not their own) but maintained that it should be effected very gradually, by the adoption, let us say, of one Arabic figure in a generation. The number nine, they thought, might be a good one to begin with, as it is written in two ways, IX and VIII, neither of them wholly convenient in complex computation. Other mathematicians said that Arabic numbers would destroy the philosophic spirit of their science. How could one speculate on the fourth dimension unless four were written IV? What impression would their beautifully elaborated deductions make if they were associated in the students' minds with a horrid Arabic 4? The conservatives were alarmed, especially makers of the ponderous tomes of numerical reference tables which Roman notation renders essential. They enlisted an eminent pedagogue, who proved by a series of psychological experiments that children can perform long division more rapidly, more correctly, and with less mental strain, with Roman numbers than with Arabic. The conservatives were eloquent on the threats to continuity of mathematical thought. Why, if we lose sight of the fact that four presented itself to the Roman mind as five minus one, we should be cut off from all contact with our ancestors.

The replacement of Roman numerals by the efficient Arabic system was a fraught business in Europe, although it has made modern science possible. The hinterlands hung on to the old figures for another 500 years.

#### Verse and werse

I take it you already know  
Of tough and bough and cough and dough?  
Others may stumble, but not you,  
On hiccough, thorough, lough and through.  
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps  
To learn of less familiar traps?

The wind was rough  
and cold and blough.  
She kept her hands within her mough.

It chilled her through,  
her nose grough blough,  
and still the squall the faster flough.  
And yet although  
there was nough snough  
the weather was a cruel fough.  
It made her cough.  
Please do not scough.  
She coughed until her hat blough ough.

from Brush up your English by T S Watt

### Spelling limericks

A teacher whose spelling's unique  
Thus wrote down the days of the wique:

The first he spelt 'Sunday', the  
second day  
'Munday',  
And now a new teacher  
they sique.

A merchant addressing a debtor Remarked  
in the course of his lebtor That he chose to  
suppose, a man knose  
what he ose, And the sooner he pays it the bebtor.

Scoundrels pushed to the front in a queue  
With a shove and a bash and a shueue, But a  
loser-out said, as they jumped on  
his haid, 'When I sueue  
yueue, yueue'll rueue  
what yueue dueue.'

Whenever she looks down the aisle She gives me a  
beautiful smaisle: And of all of her beaux, I am  
certain she  
sheaux She likes me the best of the paisle.

A wise old owl lived in an oak  
The more he saw the less he spoak



The less he spoak the more he heard  
We all should be like that old beard

Anonymous sources include  
Rimes without Reason, Lake Placid Club, NY.

The Chaos, A double-dutch epic

These heroic verses of 246 lines were written by a  
Dutchman, Dr Gerard Nolst Trenite«, and circulate overseas  
in institutions teaching English. Here are 36 of the 246 lines:

Dearest creature in creation,  
Studying English pronunciation,  
I will teach you in my verse

Words like corpse, corps, horse, & worse.  
I will keep you, Suzy, busy,  
Make your head with heat grow dizzy.  
Tear in eye, your dress you'll tear.  
I hear you now. Here is my prayer.  
Just compare heart, beard, and heard,  
Dies and diet, lord and word,  
And be careful how you speak:  
Say break and steak, but bleak and streak;  
Cloven, oven, how and low,  
Daughter, laughter, poem, toe.  
Viscount, viscous, vicar, cigar,  
Solar, mica, war and far.  
Billet does not rhyme with ballet,  
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.  
Blood and flood are not like food,  
Nor is mould like should and would.  
River, rival, tomb, bomb, comb,  
Doll and roll and some and home.  
Shoes, goes, does. Now first say finger,  
And then singer, ginger, linger,  
Souls but foul, haunt but aunt,  
Font, front, wont, and want and grant,  
Real, zeal, mauve, gauze, gouge and gauge,  
Marriage, foliage, mirage, and age.  
Query does not rhyme with very  
Nor does fury sound like bury.

Finally, which rhymes with enough –  
Though, through, plough, or dough, or cough?  
Hiccough has the sound of cup.  
My advice is, give it up!

#### Dethless Verses from the Poets

Geoffrey Chaucer, c. 1340–1400, the father of English poetry, wrote on spelling in *Troilus and Criseyde*:

And for ther is so grete dyversite  
In Englissh and in writyng of our tonge,  
So preye I God, that non myswrite the, Ne the  
mysmetere, for defaut of tonge. And red wherso thow  
be or elles songe, That thow be understonde, God I  
biseche!

Chaucer's spelling is still readable, but may be easier if updated. 'And because there is such great diversity in English and in writing of our tongue, so I pray God, that none mis-write you or mis-metre you, for lack of language. And wherever you are read or sung, I beseech God that you be understood.' How modern are Chaucer's ideas and problems, if not his syntax. 'It is a pity that Chawcer, who had geneyus, was so uneducated. He's the wuss speller I know of.' (Artemus Ward, 1834–67).

Not quite Sir Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

Breathes there the man with soul so dead  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This spelling's mad?  
Whose heart has ne'er within him burned  
As child-ward he his eyes hath turned,  
To see that wandering alien band.  
If such there be, go mark him well,  
I bet that he too cannot spell  
If truth to tell.

I think this poem ends with the pterified speller plunging

to endless night.

Hamlet, partly written by William Shakespeare

To spell and how to spell: that is the question,  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The Slings and Arroes of outrageous customs,  
Or to take arms against a set of trubls,  
And by impruving, end them. Unbind the spel,  
No more, and by this help to end  
The hed-aches and the thousand nasty shocks  
Our young are heir to. Just to amend –  
Aye, there's the rub. For if we spel with sense,  
What pundits do, if we should shufl off this  
ancient coil,  
Might make us pause. There's a respect  
That makes calamity of comon sense.

John Keats looks into the spelling of Chapman's Homer

Much have I travel'd in the realms of ink,  
And many horrid spellings have I read,  
On many lists my memory was fed  
So hard to spell or read, so hard to think.  
Never of any hope were students told  
For old eccentrics held it their demesne –  
A word I can't pronounce or spell, though seen –

Till I heard Reason speak out loud and bold.  
Then felt I like some worm within a book  
When metamorphosis comes in its ken,  
Or like stout Cortes, when with eagle look,  
He learnt to spell in Spanish, and his men  
Gazed at each other with a wild Gadzook,  
And left surmising to the English pen.

Spelling drama

Three early 1970s expurgated Australian radio playlets were Onky Upon a Timmy (a fairy story), The Miggrant who Spelt licky an Angle (Leonardo da Vinci comes to Australia) and A Miggrant's Traggedigh (a Mediterranean momma learns to speak English from books). Modern drama now presents American Spelling Bees as tragedy, comedy, suspense and horror.

## 2 Swept away on the wild shores of spelling

What most people do not know about spelling

The def and dum alfabet

Every letter in the alphabet can be silent.

A feather was spelled fether in Old English

B limb – lim in Old English

C scissors – sisours in Middle English

D Wednesday – Wodnes daeg, Woden's  
Day, from Old English

E favourite – favorit from Old French

F halfpenny was a half penny

G foreign – forain from Old French

H school – scol in Old English

I believe – bileven in Middle English

J marijuana – American Spanish Maria  
Juana? Mary Jane

K blackguard was black guard

L palm – paum in Middle English

M mnemonic from mnemonikos, Greek

N autumn from autumnus, Latin

O young – yong in Middle English

P receipt – receit in Middle English

Q lacquer – from lacre, Old French

R burr – burre in Middle English

S island – iland in Middle English

T hustle from husselen, Dutch

U though – thoh in Middle English

V fivepence was five pence  
W whole – hal in Old English  
X faux pas – French  
Y mayor – from maire, French  
Z rendezvous – French

So now we have feather, limb, scissors, favourite, foreign,  
school, believe, palm, young, receipt, lacquer, island, hustle,  
though, whole and mayor, with extra letters that were not  
there before.

## The wild shores of consonants – how sounds are spelled

b–bob bobbed cupboard hautboy bhang  
d– did diddle could dhow Buddhist  
bdellium burthen mezzo f–fife fluff  
enough photograph calf often sapphire  
lieutenant g– gig giggle ghost jungle  
guess plague exhibit  
blackguard example eczema h–had who j–jig judge giant  
soldier exaggerate k–keg kick can quick cheque school chalk  
tobacco  
exit exhibition viscount antique khaki liquorice  
bacchanal falcon pukka ache l–lid lull island silhouette m–  
him common comb empty hymn Campbell  
drachm phlegm palm sandwich n – fun funny gnaw know  
handsome gunwale  
mnemonic pneumatic demesne p– pop popped shepherd  
hiccough halfpenny r–ran merry wrap rhyme corps myrrh s– sit  
city mass scissors castle answer coalesce  
finesse schism raspberry sword  
psalm isthmus next waltz t–tot totter  
two jumped thyme debt yacht indict  
veldt might phthisis receipt waltz pizza v–value revving of  
halves nephew Grosvenor w–win queen one when memoir  
bivouac penguin y–yes sleighing onion cue z – zoo buzz as  
scissors czar Windsor business  
beaux  
ch–chill match question cello righteous  
gh– lough Hugh loch  
sh–shall chalet ocean fission sugar station

th – eighth Matthew thick, and th as in them  
zh – vision baize rouge jabot  
who – whistle  
ng – sing uncle blanket handkerchief tongue

## The wild shores of vowels

Vowel spellings are made from the accidents of history.

Here are the most common spellings for the vowel sounds,  
with the less common and rather weird.

a – A cat guarantees to have salmon and meringue to harangue  
with plaits.

e– Red heads. I said I guess it's nonsense that many friends pay  
with cheques on Wednesdays to bury leopards.

i – Pink pigs live in the city. Pretty busy women build with  
rhythm on bicycles.

o – Hot dog was gone. John got lots of honours and laurels  
because of his knowledge of how to cough on yachts.

u – Fun run. Some won. Mothers and uncles with young blood  
have thoroughly tough tongues.

A – Cake play baby. Praise great trains. They reign at the ballet  
matinee«es with veils and bouquets. Eight straight dahlias in  
gaols.

E – We be real chiefs. Please meet police. Freeze cheese. Receive  
receipt. The people believe in the key to the league.

I– I like my pie right. The guide on the island eyed the diamond in  
the aisle by the choir. But why sign to either with dye?

O– No gold boat show. The rogue of a chauffeur at the depot  
holds a mauve brooch on his shoulder. Folk know, though, his  
beau is a ghost in Cologne.

U– Emu music uses new clues. You view Hugh's beautiful ewe.  
There's a deuce of a feud over the juice in lieu of an impugned  
fugue.

ar – Fast cars class for bananas. Half the guard at the heart of the bazaar laughed at the sergeant's aunt in bourgeois khaki.

er – Her girl learns fur work. The journalist's answers to the amateur nurse were worse than the colonel's circles of myrrh.

air – Where fair bears care. The mayor's parents spared their aeroplane fares.

or – Poor sports stores' wars. George bore four swords on board his horse, of course.

aw – Raw ball talk ought to be taught in autumn. The cause of the awe was broad.

ow – Brown mouse sounds. Sauerkraut on the bough.

oy – Boys boil with the noise of gargoyles on the lifebuoy.

oo – Blue moons truly do a lulu. Choose fruit soup or lose two shoes en route to the manoeuvres.

oo – A wolf could pull woolly worsted.

### Double-dealing curiosities – Say quickly:

Halve valve, have cave, chase phase, caste haste, shall mall, plait bait, said paid, head bead, sweat pleat, loot foot, fear pear, sew stew, cease tease, deaf leaf, skied tied, give live, sneak break, toe shoe, crouch touch, sour tour, tough cough, choose noose, wool stool, good brood, broad toad, both broth, post cost, gone lone, lose pose, grow brow, some dome, rush bush, bull lull, put rut.

Psychologists Mark Seidenberg & J L McClelland had a lot of fun with this list.

### Words with two spellings for the same sound:

i- women

j- judge

k- character, clock, cook, kicked, expect

s- science, surface, scissors, special, silence, sincerely, sixty, necessary, success

y- union

### Words with two sounds for the same spelling:

a- banana  
c- bicycle, practice, catch, circus, electricity, capacious  
e- receding  
g- garage, gigantic  
i- incisive  
o- chocolate, robot  
p- peripheral  
qu - quinquere  
r- rider  
s- suppose, surprise, disease  
t- station, trait  
u- fugue  
y- symphony

### Back to front spelling

<wh> spells the sound /hw/ in which what why when  
whip and wheedle. <wh> spells the sound /h/ in who  
whole where whortleberry. <wh> spells the sound /w/ as  
in wharf and whoa.

'When two vowels go out walking, the first vowel does  
the talking' – except when it does not, as in aisle, break,  
pseudo, chief, oedema, persuade.

### Infernal spelling – a list of demons

Spelling demons inhabit lists in a pandemonium of their  
own under schoolroom floors. The average demon has  
2.4 tricks, so if you escape one, others can still trap you.  
Here are 80 of the 120 worst spelling demons from a list set  
for students at a secretarial college. All have surplus letters,  
some are tricked out with double-consonant hazards, some  
have obscure sounds hard to spell, and some just mislead  
with letters you don't expect.

accommodate assassin acknowledge acquire aggravate  
appropriate ballerina because building business conscious  
correspondence colleagues commemorate commission committee  
compatible comparative connoisseur corroborate courteous  
disappoint desperate disastrous dissatisfied donkey especially



The ironic college list of  
exception efficient embarrass equipped erroneous essential  
fascinate feasible February foreign fulfilled friends gauge guile  
guardian height illiterate illuminate immigrant incidentally  
indispensable irrelevant irreparable irresistible immediately  
liaison manoeuvre medicine Mediterranean miniature minutes  
mortgage movable negotiable necessary occasion occasional  
occurrence parallel paralleled parliament penicillin scholastic  
seize science scissors separate unconscious unparalleled usually  
valuable view Wednesday

flipside is that six other words in the  
demons are demonic because they are

unexpectedly regular, when you have learned to expect the  
worst: bachelor, exercise, harass, inoculate and omitted.

(Little Jessica wrote 'I like to serf ', crossed it out and  
wrote 'I like to surghe'. The common expectation that  
correct spelling will be terrible is a frequent cause of bad  
spelling.)

I before E after tea – if you want to know

Every literate person should know the reasons for what  
they must rote-learn or continually check. Why all these  
fiddly bits that sort out the pukka from the uneddicated? In  
spelling One-Upmanship, unaided rote-memory was once  
needed to spell -ible or -able, -ent or -nt, -ie or -ei, -ce or -se,  
-efy or -ify – a burden of Sisyphus to push uphill. Now we  
have the bondage of Ixion, tied to the wheel that is labelled  
spell-checker, our extra-cerebral electronic memories. Why  
so many fusses?.

One well-known rule is I BEFORE E EXCEPT AFTER C –  
except for *prima facie*, *specie*, *superficies*, and a score of  
words like *caffeine*, *casein*, *codeine*, *forfeit*, *protein*, *seize*,  
*weir*, and *weird*. This C-rule applies to derivatives of the  
Latin *capiō*. Ancient Romans had no problems with this.

IE can be pronounced as in *diet*, *sieve*, *friend*, *adieu* and  
*view*, but chiefly it is pronounced as in *chief*. EI can be

pronounced as in foreign, veil, receipt, either, their, but usually it is pronounced EE as in deceive.

This ie-ei spelling business has been an intrusion that changed words like beleven, theef, preest, cheef, greef, feeld, feend, yeeld, peece, and ceelen into believe, thief, priest, chief, grief, field, fiend, yield, piece, and ceiling. (The French original was ciel.)

For ABLE/IBLE, Fowler says: 'Words ending in -able generally owe their form to the Latin termination -ABILIS or the Old French -ABLE, or both, and words in -IBLE to the Latin IBILIS. The suffix -ABLE is also added to words of distinctly French or English origin and as a living element to English roots.' Would you like fries with that? Fowler's English Usage took eight columns to explain when to use -ABLE and when to use IBLE, and the exceptions. Even before you have read all the eight columns, you will agree with Fowler's conclusion that 'the current conception of -BLE is elastic'.

For -ANT/ENT, there is a simple rule with a swag of exceptions. -ANT ends nouns, -ENT ends adjectives – except when they don't.

For -CEED/CEDE. 'The curious thing is that a division so little reasonable should be so religiously observed.' Fowler again. 'Verbs in -CEDE -CEED are so many . . . and the causes of the difference are so far from obvious, that mistakes are frequent.' The 'CEED' words violate the claim that our 'optimum spelling' shares visual appearances for related words, because exceptions include exceed – excess, proceed – procedure, succeed – succession.

The old solution to the -ISE /IZE spelling dilemma was to take IZE as normal and then learn several dozen exceptions. The modern solution is that each country or journal decides on its own house style for -ISE or IZE. Set your spell-checker according to your country or your journal. The Oxford Guide to the English Language offers this assistance: 'The choice applies only to the verbal suffix of Greek origin added to nouns and adjectives with the sense of make into, treat with, or act in the way of (that which is indicated by the stem word.'

-OR/ER 'These two suffixes are from Latin (through French) and Old English respectively, but' (guess what's coming) 'their origin is not a sure guide to their distribution'. (The Oxford Guide)

SILENT E. You may think, 'I know what silent E does.' Yes, you think it is the magic silent letter that changes the sound of the vowel before it. You add silent E to mat, met, nit, not, nut and you have mate, mete/meat or meet, but then, surprise, it is night rather than nite, and newt rather than nute. And then our little helper silent E has nine more jobs, and because there are so many, they trip over each other.

If you want to know about what else silent E can do: Silent E distinguishes nouns like dense and please from plural or verb endings like dens and pleas. Silent E as in ice and rage changes the sounds of c and g, in contrast to scenic and rag. Silent E distinguishes words like ore and caste from words that sound the same, like or and cast, and Silent E as in definite, minute and primate, can show Latin or French origin. When Latin-origin words are spelled as in deficit and explicit, those in the know will know that those words came into English more recently. If that helps.

Silent E as in eclipse and arabesque can show the syllable before it is stressed, according to some linguists, but others are unsure. Silent E as in give, have, nerve and freeze prevents real English words ending with V or Z, so you can recognise foreign words like kibbutz and fez. Or rev? Silent E, for no reason that I can find out, as in come. Perhaps from an antique inflection now unspoken? Silent E as in table apple and centre could have been spelled as in label, chapel and enter. Or axolotl.

To those nine silent E uses, add non-silent E, as in apostrophe, karate, curare, epitome, anemone and simile. And not-silent E can sound like ay if it comes from French, as in cafe« and fiance« .

## Doubled consonants

Here are a few things that the learned Fowler had to say

about doubled consonants, in words that can hardly be bettered:

Doubled consonants cause a large proportion of the tears shed over spelling. Little relief can be given. The words in which sound is no guide to whether there is one consonant or two are not a score or so . . . but thousands. Nothing but a complete spelling book will serve the turn of a really weak speller . . . If a list were made of the many thousands of words whose spelling cannot be safely inferred from their sound, the doubtful point in perhaps nine-tenths of them would be whether some single consonantal sound was represented by one, one doubled, or two different consonants as in comic, embarrass or science. For anyone who knows no language but English, the basic function of doubled consonants is to distinguish the pronunciation of vowels as in holy and holly, but the interference of the other causes is so incalculable and so frequent that he soon finds it hopeless to reply upon the principle in doubtful cases.

Origins for these conventions may be traced back 'sometimes to factors in word formation philologically explicable or inexplicable'.

Spelling is twice as hazardous when there are double chances for making doubling mistakes – as in unparalleled, accommodate or disappoint (dissap-disapp-dissappdisap ...)

SPELLING THE SOUND S. The too-many-cooks rule has won in trying to solve the problem of showing when a word ending in S is not a plural or a verb. So we have spellings such as mortice tortoise horse house these and cheese, plus princess (distinguished from princes), seize (seas and sees), freeze (frees), size (sighs), praise (prays), fence (fens), tease (teas) and daze (days). Do-nothing spellings, as in cactus, lens, caucus, locus, sinus, corpus, iris, alias and fracas suggest all these other unpredictable stratagems may not be needed after all. New words rarely bother about fancy S endings.

Philip Smith collected eight uses for final -SS alone. Here are six:

. Stress on a final syllable, as in harass, duress,  
morass . Feminine – peeress, waitress . Short vowel – boss,  
lass, dress, glass, class, less,  
dross . Classical suffix – congress, ingress, progress .  
Distinguishing words that sound the same –  
canvas/ canvass . More than one  
function at once – princess/princes,  
caress/cares

Or perhaps none of these, as in carcass, fortress and  
embarrass.

The Oxford Guide to the English Language has 35 pages  
on teensy spelling issues like these. Then a further ten pages  
of double-columns on 'Difficult and confusable spellings  
not covered in previous entries'. What a lot of interesting  
fun! How different from the logic of mathematics! The  
exploration of whys and hows and their exceptions could  
take anyone off drugs. But is it real Culture?

### Homophobia – the fear of words that sound the same

A convict is locked in a cell with only a chair.  
How does he escape?  
He rubs his hands until they are sore.  
He uses the saw to cut the chair in half.  
Two halves make a whole.  
He climbs through the hole.  
He shouts himself hoarse.  
He gets on the horse and gallops away.

### Only if you want to know

- . Homophones are words that sound the same, like might, mite.
- . Homographs are written the same, like bow, bow.
- . Homonyms are written and sounded the same, but have  
different meanings.
- . Heterophonic homographs are spelled the same but not  
sounded the same, as in lead/lead.
- . Heterographic homophones are not spelled the same, but  
sound the same, as in pain, pane.

Spell-checkers as well as people continually mix up the spellings of its and it's, and there, their, they're because they sound the same. All learners are confused at first. Many never learn. Should we worry?

Back in 1768, nearly 250 years ago, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to a lady who was putting up the usual arguments that people still write to newspapers today against removing difficulties from English spelling. His answer still holds good. In talking we are not confused by words that sound the same, because the sense of the sentence gives us the meaning, and this happens in reading too.

More homophones are spelled the same than are spelled differently. Hardly anyone knows this, because when we read we never notice there could be alternative meanings, unless the context actively promotes puns or confusion, as in subeditor's witticisms and jokes like 'The truck had a tender behind'.

I bet you never noticed that in the last three paragraphs there were 16 words that sound the same as other words and are spelled the same – spell checkers sound letter putting arguments papers still holds sense sentence hardly one notice promotes and like – while there were 14 words that sound the same as other words but have different spellings – all we rote letter in to write not too one knows read there and be. Psychologists like to have different spellings for homophones, because it gives them a fascinating occupation researching how people try to cope with them.

English has more homofones than most other alfabetic writing systems, although the French have a phrase 'si six cents six scies scient six cents six cypre`s', which has eight /si/ sounding words in it. The Chinese try to distinguish their thousands of one-syllable homofones by five tones in speech, different characters in writing, and making compound words. But the one syllable HSI, for example, can be written in 116 characters, and Chao tells of a story in classical Chinese made up entirely of 37 characters for HSI pronounced in only one tone, about a man named Hsi who

plays with a rhinoceros in a creek, and it attacks him.

Here are some classic English homofoneries:

A hansom buoy flu down the rode to meat a suite fare  
made. He was a cole-mynah and she was a cellar of  
muscles. His hew was pail, butt he grue boulder and side,  
'Owe, deer won, aye knead ewe sew! Eye can knot weight  
until hour bridle our when wee prey at the alter. The belles  
will peel. Then we wood sale strait aweigh in grate stile  
four a cruse two sea awl the pieceful aisles and eyelets over  
the see. Pleas let us steel aweigh!

This one is easier:

Notice for a fancy dress party

The class can send a letter with a present for everybody  
who takes part to make sure there will be fair shares. It  
might even be just as well to step round the side with a  
change of dress in case there may be a light fall of hail on  
the way back.

Deliberate confusions to try to read aloud quickly:

Does do not buck but a buck does.  
My jaw was number after a number of injections.  
They were not content with the content of the memo.  
The dump will refuse refuse.  
The minute was minute and took a minute.  
The row of rowers had a row.  
The wind made us wind up the window.  
The wound was wound with a bandage.  
Can a sow sow, or a sewer sew a sewer?  
It was not their object to object to the object.  
The insurance was invalid for the invalid.  
The soldiers desert in the desert.  
Those present will present a present to him presently.  
The dove dove down.

An Internet favourite with many versions is 'Remember  
When':

A computer was something on TV

in a science fiction show of note  
A window was something to clean  
and ram was the cousin of a goat

Meg was the name of my girlfriend  
and gig was a job for the nights  
Now they all mean different things  
and that really mega bytes

An application was for employment  
A program was a TV show  
A cursor used profanity  
A keyboard was a piano

Memory you lost with age  
A CD was a bank account  
and if you had a 3" floppy  
you hoped nobody found out

Compress you did to the garbage  
not something you did to a file  
and if you unzipped anything in public  
you'd be in jail for awhile

Log on was adding wood to the fire  
Hard drive was a long trip on the road  
A mouse pad was where a mouse lived  
and a backup jammed up your commode

Cut you did with a knife  
Paste you did with glue  
A web was a spider's home  
and a virus was the flu

I'll stick to my pad and paper  
and the memory in my head  
Nobody's killed in a computer crash  
but it makes them wish they were dead.



W W Skeat, who edited the Etymological Dictionary, became the world authority on homophones. He knew so much about them that they helped to drive him to be a founder of the English Simplified Spelling Society.

'Spell' is itself a homographic homophone, with a magic meaning.

### Half the words you read

Cheer up. One hundred words make up about half of all you read. If you can read them, you can read half of almost anything. Tell learners that, and their job seems easier. Anyone can check this, with a blue pencil on any piece of print. Even beginners who can read only one word, they can make an impressive blue mess if they mark every time it appears.

Only 31 of 100 words are tricky spellings: all almost always among as come some could should would half have give know of off one only once other pull push put to do was what want who why and the ending tion.

### How dictionaries spell and how they change

'It's in the dictionary!' your Scrabble opponent cries, flourishing the dictionary page that allows oxtail on a triple word score. Only two weeks ago, you had an even higher score for oxtail on a triple, but the dictionary on the table then said, 'Nyah, Ox-tail has a hyphen'. There are three useful things to know about dictionaries.

Play Scrabble with more than one dictionary – it gives you more chances.

Dictionaries are undemocratic. Two independent surveys have shown that 56% of the literate population spell accommodate differently from the dictionary. Should the dictionary change?

Actually, change does happen slowly in dictionaries. We had a relative who had met the Queen occasionally, and

who thought everyone was de trop and uneducated if they didn't continue to spell develop as developpe. We asked if he had asked the Queen how she spelled the word, and he said he might in the future, but he never did.

Change can happen because dictionaries allow several thousand words to be spelled more than one way and gradually some spellings drop off. Even Dr Johnson allowed choices such as choose or chuse, cloak or cloke and fewel or fuel in his Dictionary of 1755, when he could not make his own decision. Gradually, over a hundred years or so, the more unhelpful spellings lose public support, and the more foreign spellings become more Englished. Around 4% of words have alternative spellings and 0.4% have three or more alternatives. Rare, exotic and dialect words are most likely to have many spellings, because they may be from a different writing system, or may have sprouted unchecked in the spoken language before they were written down.

To add a frisson to your own writing, here are some spellings that dictionaries have dropped gradually and you can still find in old novels. These spellings could be the equivalent of name-dropping to those of you who have never met the Queen even once: prophane gulph shewn synonimes subtilty stile croud chymists desarts surprize expence gothick chace excentrick cotemporaries pionier and sope. And developpe.

## The Chomsky story

This section is for the literary folk who believe that English spelling is 'optimal' for a deep psycholinguistic reason about representing underlying phonology, deep structure and word relationships, because Professor Noam Chomsky said so. Chomsky himself has written

. . . after the cognitive dissonance that occurred in the last semester, I feel that before we continue our study of the Chomskian deep structure of the English language and its optimal representation in English spelling – we must first sweep a few horrible facts out of the way ...

that he does not oppose spelling change or think that English spelling cannot be improved, and he has objected to the sweeping generalisations that have been made from his work. As a champion of the oppressed, Chomsky would be on the side of making spelling more user-friendly for everyone if it could be done.

Some people still repeat an argument that runs: if English spelling were easier for learners, we could not tell that words were related if their sound changed – for example, in nation – national, medical – medicine. A check of vocabulary, however, shows that this possible advantage holds mainly for words of classical origin that have fairly predictable spellings anyway. Only 16 word sets with irregular spellings, such as heal – health, meaning – meant and reading – read, follow the principle. On the other hand, improving the spelling could improve the visible relationship of sets such as fiery – fire, favour – favorite, four – forty, high – height, jelly – gelid, labour – laboring, speak – speech, stable – stability and strategy – stratagem.

Dozens of words look similar enough to be recognisably related, although they differ in both spelling and pronunciation – such as began – begin, best – better, blood – bleed – bled, came – come, broken – break, spoken – speak, bring – brought, sing – sang, teach – taught, catch – caught, buy – bought, fly – flies – flight – flew.

### Is English spelling irregular?

Eighty per cent of English words follow spelling rules – but you can't predict which words do and which don't, because there are so many different possibilities. Godfrey Dewey counted 547 spellings for around 44 English speech sounds; A J Ellis found 658; Hanna et al's computer at Stanford found 377 spellings for 52 sounds.

The rules for Italian spelling can be set out on half a page. Now that's regularity.

When you're a married man, Samivel, you'll understand a good many things as you dont understand now; but vether

it's worth while going through so much to learn so little, as the charity-boy said when he got to the end of the alphabet, is a matter o' taste.'

Mr Weller to son Sam, in Charles Dickens'  
Pickwick Papers

## 3 Sealed sexion

For Mature Adults Only

Warning: This Sexion contains LANGUAGE and IDEAS.

Unprintable spelling. Could not be printed. Laptop dancing. Better left to your imagination. Spelling stripping.

Upper-class ladies used to dress to the nines in voluminous clothes, partly so they could not get anywhere fast, partly because dressing and undressing gave them something to do all day, but mainly to impress. 'Conspicuous Consumption', cluttering in order to show off, applies to English spelling too. Today, lovely ladies strip to draw attention. Spelling can be stripped too.

### The 16-word spelling test

For anyone who thinks they are a good speller.

Some or all of these words may be incorrectly spelled. Write them out correctly.

acomodate .... exessiv .... miniture . . . . professr remembrd . . . .  
unparaleld . . . . disapoint . . . . gardian mischivus .....psychology ....  
sovren ..... disiplin iliterat .....ocasion ..... recomend .... tecnicly

Why are these words so hard to spell? Because the missing letters are not needed to show meaning or pronunciation, so there are no clues to work out or remember what is missing

and where it should go.

If you want to know how other people scored

Primary teachers at an in-service course on spelling averaged 14.8 correct. Second came 30 psychologists at an international conference on dyslexia – but the only word they could all spell was psychology. Of 50 reading experts at an international conference on Reading at Reading, 12 could spell perfectly, but the scores went down to 8. Next were 45 psychologists at an international conference on Intelligence, then 7 lawyers concerned with delinquency. A third of 30 trainee secondary teachers spelled all words correctly, and 8 of 75 undergraduates. A hundred secondary school students averaged 6.9, and 25 overseas students preparing for university courses that year averaged 4.3. Aboriginal students from the outback preparing for university studies found the test too hard.

Fifty young overseas musicians at an International Youth Orchestra festival at Aberdeen were more likely to read faster, pronounce correctly and understand better, when surplus letters were deleted from one version of two parallel tests. Other experiments find that good readers often do not notice and poor readers may benefit when ‘surplus’ letters are omitted, clear proof that the suspect letters really are surplus.

Spelling has been streamlining gradually for hundreds of years. Dr Johnson himself streamlined spellings sometimes, but we go further. Dr Johnson’s Dictionary included energetick exotick fabrick phlegmatick publick critick gothick teutonick domestick characteristicks authour superiour translatour errorr oeconomy subtile and controul.

Around 6% of everyday words have more letters than they need to show meaning or pronunciation, and which may even mislead. But stripping can be taken too far. This lampoon that cut spelling to the b-r-b-s was ppetratd in The Times, on 23 September 2003:

‘Gbygk rls OK

Wy typos wont mtr in tomws wld

Inst of langg we h jgn, inst of pncpls, slgns, and

inst of genu ides, trva'.

Spelling is stripd in many places in this book. How often have you noticed or been afrontit, as the Scots say? It does save ink, paper, time and hassle, which the Scots were rather canny about.

### SPAM spelling

Spam mail on the Internet, which conveys odd ideas about the obsessions of modern culture, often also reveals that education has failed spammers in literacy as well as morals:

IMPROVE YUOR CARREER  
RIASE YOUR STATUE

But in chatrooms and on blogs, everyone is free to practise their own commonsense in spelling.

### Gorgeous Spellings

Many spellings look too beautiful to change. If you list your ten most beautiful spellings, you are quite likely to include beautiful and gorgeous. Change the spelling and the words dont look bootifool any more. Here is a collection of beautiful spellings.

#### The beautiful princess

Once upon a time, the beautiful daughter of a great magician wanted more pearls to put among her treasures. 'Look through the centre of the moon when it is blue,' said her mother in answer to her question. 'You might find your heart's desire.' The princess laughed, because she doubted these words. Instead, she used her imagination, and moved into the photography business, and took pictures of the moon in colour. 'I perceive most certainly that it is almost wholly white,' she thought. She also found that she

could make enough money in eight months to buy herself two lovely huge new jewels too.

Try writing that story in a spelling that is more beautiful, or without spelling traps. These may not be the same.

Do you like your spellings curly and curious, or sleek and slick? The old familiar spellings from your first fairy stories or space comics? BAM! VROOM! Supercalligistic . . . or a bit of chAnj with D lAtSt SMS? Or, suppose you were the Master of Spelling?

### Vulgar spelling

We dont mind the spelling  
TOO but not  
HOO or  
YOO, HOT  
but not  
WOT, COS  
but not  
WOS, BY but  
not WY,

Imagine TOO spelled TUI like SUIT, NOT spelled NHAT like WHAT and LIVE spelled LIEVE like SIEVE.

The Victorian well-off classes loved reading dialect spelling in novels with the common people saying REELY WOT WOS YOO HOO WEN SEZ and WY. The irony is that now most of us are common, and say REELY WOT WOS YOO HOO WEN and WY ourselves. We wonder, exactly how did those top Victorian readers themselves pronounce WAS WHAT WHO YOU or SAYS?

### Spelling on Mars and Venus

The secret life of Hyphens

Unions in spelling mean Hyphens, lawful and unlawful. The biology of it is that first, there are two words. The two

words go together so often that they become linked by hyphen, the courtship stage. The union is consummated when they become one word. So, cow boy becomes cow-boy becomes cowboy and trade off becomes trade-off and then tradeoff.

Sometimes the biological analogy is a caterpillar, legged up with hyphens. Never-to-be-forgotten, fair-tomiddling and She-who-must-be-obeyed.

The evolutionary process now is survival of the quick and hasty. Streamlining was born into print as a word already united around 1870. Around 1760, Tobias Smollett spelled every body, mean while, and no body as two words. He hyphenated up-lifted, night-mare, sixpence, hi-way, small-pox, May-fair and sweet-heart. Smollett's only combination that has not turned into a single word now is Fair-sex.

Orwell's Newspeak mates words without any hyphens as courting preliminaries. The mutations mean whatever the official view wants them to mean. What is needed is common sense ? common-sense ? commonsense.

If you go dashing around, take care. Who is the anti-trade unionist? What was the silk stocking-tax? A superfluous hair-remover is not needed. A hyphen might have helped the headline 'PEACE MEETING RIOT'.

## The spelling adventures of Don Quixote

Taking up the challenge of the impossible

I dont know why people bother climbing Everest, or sail round the world alone, or quest for gold medals, running millisecs faster. These have all been done. The Guinness Book of Records has had enough pie-eaters. They could thrill to a greater challenge. Try to do something that everybody still says cannot be done. What still cannot be done? Make English spelling userfriendly to suit everyone, with the combination of visual clues to meaning for readers, links to the spoken language for learners, more predictability for writers, closer to international vocabulary shared across the world, and yet barely disturbing for



present readers and maintaining access to our heritage in print.

Here is the opening chapter of *The Adventures of Don Quixote* as this famously eccentric Spanish knight might have written it himself, in quest of this 'impossible'. It changes 1.96% of letters in text, and cuts out 4.9%. Eighty-three per cent of words have no letter changes. Unlike present spelling's hundreds of rules and thousands of exceptions, eight principles make this spelling predictable spelling without traps. It can be used in three versions. One is for everyday readers, the second, shown here, also for readers, includes accents as a guide to pronunciation for learners, including learners of English, and the third, for beginners and spellers, starts with the basic alphabetic principle which is then modified by the other principles, and does not include the single-pronunciation alternative vowel spellings that are no problem for readers but the heck for spellers.

#### The Life and Achievements of Don Quixote de la Mancha

**In** a vilaj in La Mancha in Spain, ther livd not long ago one of those o`ld-fasiond jentlmen, who ar never without a lanse on a stand, an o`ld shield, a thin hors and a grayhound. He ate beef mor than mutton, with minsd meat on mo`st nights, lentils on Fri`days, and a pijon on Sundays. He had a plush coat, velvet briches, with velvet slippers, for holidays, and a su` te of the best homespun cloth for wurking-days. His family was a houske`per something over forty, a nese not twenty, and a man that servd in the house and in the field. The master himself was nearly fifty years o`ld, with a helthy and strong complexion, lean-bodyd and thin-fased, an erly rizer, and a luver of hunting. Some say his surname was Quixada, 'lantern-jaws', tho this dus not matter much to us, as long as we ke`pe strictly to the tru` th in every point of this history.

When our jentlman had nothing to du (which was almo`st all the year round), he pasd his time re`ding books about Knight-

errantry, which he did with such delight, that at last he left off his cuntry sports, and e`ven the cair of his estate. He so`ld land to purchas mor books. Nothing ple`sed him mor than the wurks of the famus Feliciano de Sylva; for his brilliant prose, and intricat expressions seemd to him so meny perls, espesially the luv-speeches and chalenjes in an extraordinary sti`le, 'The sublime hevens, which with yur divinity divi`nely fortifi` u with the stars, and fix u the desurver of the desert . . .

Rapsodys like this stra`njely puzld the poor jentlman's understanding. He rakd his brain to unravel thair me`ning, which Aristotle himself could never hav found, tho he wer raizd from the ded to du so. The Knight often desi`red to put pen to paper, and finish the unfinishabl book himself, but he had mor important plans.

(From Chapter 1, from the Spanish by  
Miguel Cervantes)

If you would like to know the prinsipls to help lerners and spellers,

THE FIRST BREAKTHROUGH is KEEP unchanged 31 of the most common worst-spelled words – all almost always among as come some could should would half know of off one only once other full pull put push to was what want who why, plus -sion, -zion and -tion rather than -shun. Recognise ai ea ie ee igh oa ew ir as 8 alternativ vowel spellings with only one pronunciation each, for reading, but not needing to be lernd for writing. The rest of the 100 most common words have predictable spellings, and together they make up around half of everything you read, so half the problem is solved with no change. 'Magic E' as in hope, mate, wine remains an option to show 'long' vowels AEIOU in final silabls or distinguish nouns ending in S.

BREAKTHRU 2 spells the 'long vowels' AEIOU by marking with a diacritic accent a e i o u 'short vowel' spellings – when this is needed, mainly just for lerners. This tactic shows how to say the words and helps reading for meaning with word relationships as in na`tion/national, rese`d/resession defi`n/definition, compo`z/compozition, redu`s/reduction. Accents would apply to under 6% of words, of which 4% are familiar spellings such as `old, mo`st and tru`th. Skilled readers would need accents on less than 1% of words.

THE THIRD KEY is that learners begin with the alphabetical principle that letters represent sounds. That is then modified with morphemic principles to show meaning through the spelling, including consistent spellings for vowels at the end of words, and -s endings for plurals and verbs.

That is the gist of it. Remaining guidelines can be deduced from the Cervantes example. Only research, not argument, can demonstrate what value these principles may offer towards a solution to improve English spelling.

If you want to know This passage from Don Quixote illustrates visible links with international vocabulary, in this case, the original Spanish (in brackets without diacritics.)

How could you expect me not to be surprised at what that antiquated legislator (antiguo legislador) that caused the public will say when it sees me now come out with a tale as dry as a rush, barren of invention (invenciones), devoid of style (estilo), poor (pobre) in conception (conceptos) and lacking in all erudition (erudiciones), without quotations (acotaciones) in the margins (margenes) or notes (anotaciones) at the finish (fin); whereas I see other works, never mind how fabulous and profane (fabulosos y profanos), so full of sentences (sentencias) from the whole herd of philosophers (filosofos) who are admired (admiran) and get their authors a reputation for erudition and eloquence (eruditos y elocuentes)?

This problem that troubled the author, Miguel Cervantes, 1547–1616, is still with us.

## International English spelling and the world

What most people do not know about other writing systems

Here is a list of other languages that have already made writing system improvements – some with a lot of fuss and some with none, some with minor changes and others with complete revolutions. But they can do it! (Why can't the

English?) This list is incomplete.

Afrikaans 1925  
Albanian 1909  
Belgian 1946  
Brazilian Portuguese 1912, 1943  
Chinese 1956, 1958, 1973  
Czech early 1950s,

Danish 1948, 1997/1  
Dutch Netherlands 1815, 1883, 1934, 1946, 1954  
Filipino  
Finnish 16-18th century  
French 1740, 1835, 1878, 2003  
German 1901, 1996  
Modern Greek  
Greenlandic 1973  
Hebrew 1860, 1900, 1930s, 1948  
Indonesian 1872, 1972  
Irish  
Italian 1612  
Japanese 1946  
Korean 1443, 1945  
Malaysian 1967  
Niugini Wantok  
Norwegian 1885  
Portuguese 1915  
Romanian  
Russian 1917, 1928  
Serbo-Croatian  
Spanish 1915, 1959  
Swedish 1907  
Taiwanese Mandarin  
Turkish 1928  
Vietnamese

In Xanadu did Kublai Khan

A stately spelling script decree

In 1270 AD the far-seeing Kublai Khan commissioned a

Tibetan lama called Phagspa to design an alphabet, and it was used for all imperial edicts and seals while he lived. Not many people know about this. A pity that Coleridge was interrupted before he could include it in his poem.

## 4 Pun and games

### Only punning

Mosquitoes stinging for their supper  
A sleeping bag is a knapsack.  
He was really a salamander but nobody newt.  
A myth is a female moth.  
To be inhibited is to be tied up in knots.  
In a rowboat, the choice was either oar.  
Time flies. You can't – they fly too fast.

For most puns the spelling hardly matters. Relatively few depend on spelling to be funny. Sub-editors sometimes give the impression that punning headlines is what they are there for. They report a scarf-tying demonstration with THIS IS KNOT TOO DIFFICULT and headline zoomorphic football teams: SWANNING OUT and TIGERS FOR PUNISHMENT.

Ben Jonson refused to pun on the subject of the king, because the king was not a subject. Shakespeare is the greatest punster of all time. His work, including the tragedies, has even been put in chronological order according to the number and type of puns and quibbles, with a total of ten hundred and sixty two.

The Washington Post runs a Style Invitational annual competition for readers to take any word from the dictionary, change one letter, and make a new definition. This is creative punning in spelling, as in:

Bozone: The substance surrounding stupid people,  
which stops bright ideas from penetrating.  
Giraffiti: Vandalism spray-painted very, very high.  
Beelzebug: Satan in the form of a mosquito that

gets into your bedroom at three in the morning  
and cannot be cast out.

There's a spell in punning.  
Synchronised Spelling as an Olympic Sport

The website of the Hammer, Canadian Satirical News, Stories and Hard-Hitting Headline followed the Athens Olympics of 2004 with a report of how a Canadian team won gold for Canada in the mixed Synchronised Spelling 48–65 kilogram division, with a flawless group spelling of 'pusillanimous'. 'Clear, crisp spelling, with impeccable cadence and punchy enunciation', said a CBC spelling commentator. One emotional team member called it the greatest moment of her life: 'All of the years of practice, dedication and mysterious needles that the doctor told me were totally harmless have finally paid off . . . Oops. I think I've said too much'. Commentators were surprised to see the Japanese win the semi-final, since none of them spoke English, but the Norwegian team was disqualified when one of them was caught with a dictionary down his shorts. However, the Japanese team stumbled on the word 'truck', and the Canadians won. 'After years of ridicule, spelling enthusiasts are hopeful the gold medal win will finally bring some respect to their sport. Is it really any sillier than the trampoline?'

A different sort of spelling ABZ

A Spelling Bee can sting. It is odd to have a spelling system so bad that only a few contestants can win. A spelling ABZ however is a treasure hunt about what you know about spelling, not about odd spellings. The winner of a trick can ask everyone any spelling question. If nobody knows, it's up to the judges to find out. The element of chance is that some questions are easy and some are hard.

Spelling ABZ

1 How many letters in the alphabet?

- 2 How many speech sounds in the English language? (That is, needed to distinguish words)
- 3 How many spelling patterns in English spelling represent these basic sounds?
- 4 Are any letters always sounded the same way?
- 5 Are any sounds always spelled the same?
- 6 How many letters can be silent? (For example, e is silent in private.)
- 7 What sound has the greatest number of possible spellings?
- 8 What letter has the greatest number of possible ways to pronounce it? (Not counting when it is part of a letter combination like 'th')
- 9 What consonant sound has the most possible spellings?
- 10 How many sounds can be spelled with ough?
- 11 Did you know that most other languages in the world, even French, have improved their writing systems in the past hundred years?
- 12 Name five languages with major changes in their writing systems in the past 150 years.
- 13 Name five languages making minor spelling changes in the past 150 years.
- 14 How many reasons can you think of why English spelling can never be changed?
- 15 When did the English start saying that their spelling needed spelling reform?
- 16 Name three English dictionary-makers who tried to make reforms of English spelling.
- 17 Name a historical celebrity who wanted English spelling

- to be reformed.
- 18 How many 'contradictory facts' must children accept in English spelling?
  - 19 Name as many principles of education as you can which are contradicted when children are taught present English spelling.
  - 20 Do we learn about the history of our words from their spellings?
  - 21 How do people in other countries learn about the history of the words in their language?

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### Answers

- 1 26 letters in the alphabet.
- 2 Around 44 speech sounds (fonemes). Consonants are: h l m n r w y hw ng and voiced-unvoiced pairs b-p, d-t, v-f, th-th, z-s, g-k, j-ch, zh-sh. The 19 vowels, including fused diphthongs (merging sounds): a e i o u ae ee ie oe ue ah er airawow oyoo(boot), oo (look) plus the most common vowel, slurred 'shwa' as in proper, dependant.
- 3 A J Ellis worked out 658 ways of spelling 44 speech sounds. 4 No. Even k and m are sometimes silent as in knot and mnemonic. 5 No. 6 All 26 letters can be silent. 7 The unstressed obscure vowel 'schwa' has 66 possible spellings. Next come sounds as in I and A, with 51 possible spellings each. (Sound as in A can be spelled as in baby made maelstrom champagne dahlia maim raise campaign straight trait halfpenny gaol gaoled plague plaguing gauged gauging may played mayor re they great fete feted matine«e veil dossier Seine reign reigned eight weighed ballet conveyed eyre applique bouquet.)
- 8 Letters a, e, o can all be pronounced in ten ways, as in man about many stomach was making tamtam part fall Isaac egg



- open fern sergeant feted femme pretty be azalea have on orb  
atom reason women woman mother over do choir.
- 9 The sound s has 25 spellings as in: sit hiss kissed scene  
coalesce schism case dishonest raspberry thistle isthmus  
Mrs sword cell ace Gloucester Worcester psalm worsted  
boatswain waltz next except exhibition pizzicato.
  - 10 Ough can be pronounced at least 7 ways, as in cough dough  
through thought doughty enough thorough.
  - 11 Well, you know now.
  - 12 Languages making sweeping changes in their writing  
systems in the past 150 years include Indonesian, Turkish,  
Korean, Chinese, Russian, Malaysian, Vietnamese.
  - 13 Languages making smaller changes in the past 150 years  
include Dutch, Israeli, Greek, French, German, Spanish  
and Portuguese.
  - 14 Huh.
  - 15 The medieval monk Orme was the first to write about  
English spelling reform.
  - 16 Great lexicographers who tried to promote spelling reforms  
include Samuel Johnson, Noah Webster, James Murray and  
H W Fowler.
  - 17 Hundreds of eminent persons seeking English spelling  
improvement include Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain, Charles  
Dickens, Andrew Carnegie, Theodore Roosevelt and Isaac  
Pitman.
  - 18 Sir James Murray of The Oxford English Dictionary said  
there were 20,000.
  - 19 The challenge is to name principles of education which are  
not contradicted.
  - 20 Do you? Only a few ever do.
  - 21 They look them up in a dictionary.

## GHOTI on the menu

Bernard Shaw claimed that fish could be spelled ghoti – gh  
as in enough, o as in women and ti as in notion. Spelling  
lawyers pointed out that no English word can begin with gh  
or end with only part of -tion. Shaw then gibed at their  
legalities. Here is a complete menu.

<b>Gmeaumpeau</b> <b>The menu</b> GM as in phlegm EAU – beauchamp MP – comptroller EAU as in beauty	<b>Sthwoppe</b> <b>The Soup</b> STH as in isthmus WO as in two PPE as in flapped	<b>Ciachmuorgn</b> <b>Salmon</b> C – cell IA – special C HM – drachm UO – liquor GN – reign	<b>Pbhoeu</b> <b>Beef</b> PB – cupboard HOE – diarrhoea U – lieutenant
<b>Stphoobdsc</b> <b>Spuds</b> ST – thistle PH – shepherd OO – blood BD – bdellium SC – science	<b>Gheigh Pie</b> GH – hiccough EIGH – height	<b>Queaphig</b> <b>Coffee</b> QUE – cheque A – was PH – sapphire IG- signore	<b>Tiissi</b> <b>Cheese</b> TI – question IS – debris SI – business

## Spelling as a joke

Comic strips like to have spelling as a target.

‘Now Catherine, spell Kangaroo.’ ‘Cangaru.’  
‘That’s not how the dictionary spells it.’  
‘You didnt ask me how the dictionary spells it.’

Worker: I couldn’t work yesterday, I had diarrhoea.  
Boss: You could have sent me a note.  
Worker: But I couldn’t spell it.

NUBBIN: A child writes: ‘There! I’ve spelled it right . . .  
now, if I can just figger out how to pronounce it.’  
HAGAR’s little boy writes: ‘During the Dark Ages all  
learning ~~disapered~~ ~~disipired~~ ~~disapirred~~ ~~dizappeared~~ died  
out.’  
NANCY at school: ‘Nancy, write the word Psalm.’ She  
writes Salm. ‘Wrong. It starts with a P.’ Nancy: ‘It  
psertainly pseems like a psilly way to pspell.’  
CAF: ‘I can’t understand why he can’t spell!’ says a mother  
in a supermarket with cartons labelled Wite-Brite, Sno-Boy,  
Supa Lo & Lite and Woppa-Stoppa.

A caveman cartoon shows a librarian: 'Just remember "i" before "e" except after "c", except when sounded like "a" as in neighbourhood and weight, except for eight exceptions, weird, height, foreign, leisure, neither, seize, forfeit and either.' Caveman decides, 'I tink I'll just memorise the dictionary.'

FOR BETTER OR WORSE shows Elizabeth in school, disconcerted by class responses to a series of spelling lessons such as, 'We all have the EAR sound in our minds, but what happens when we add "w" to the word EAR? It now becomes WEAR.'

LINUS to CHARLIE BROWN: 'My dad and I got into a big theological argument last night. He was looking at my report card, and wondering why I was the only one in my class who didn't get an "A" in spelling. I said, "Isn't it wonderful how each of us on this earth was created just a little bit different?" That's when we got into the theological argument.'

It hasn't only been English. A Danish cartoon of 1919 showed a Bolshevik soldier at a street barricade in Oslo, Norway.

Soldier: 'How is the revolution  
coming along in Oslo, comrade?'  
Norwegian: 'We're still fighting  
over how to spell it.'

### Trivia Box

Dan Quayle, former US Vice-President, was asked on TV about his image as a bumbler who couldn't spell, because he once wrote Potatoe. He said, 'I tell you what. I'll let all the perfect spellers support Al Gore and those who have trouble spelling can support me.'

Typewriter is the longest word using the letters on only one row of the keyboard.

Palindromes read the same left to right and right to left, as in Adam to Eve, 'Madam I'm Adam'. The longest palindrome was composed for a New Statesman

competition by Joyce Johnson in 1967, with 126 words and 467 letters. It purports to be a headmaster's notes and begins Test on Erasmus and ends Sums are set.

The sentence used for typing practice, 'THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG', uses every letter in the English alphabet.

The names of the continents all end with the letter with which they start.

Stay around mailing lists on the Internet and more spelling trivia will accumulate like fluff in a pocket, along with those unbelievable assertions such as, 'The average human eats 8 spiders in their lifetime at night'.

## 5 The Psych of Pspelling

This is a first venture into PsychoSpelling outside academia.

How children want to spell

Dictionaries record how the best people spell. How would everyone like to spell?

Alison, aged 5

Small children often invent their own spelling before they get round to learning ours.

- . MGet GLUS G: I might get glasses.
- . THIS SI WER MI DADAA WRX B CWIYIT: This is where my daddy works. Be quiet.
- . SKRAMLX: Scrambled eggs. Typed on a typewriter in 1910 by Edward Rondthaler, the inventor of photolettering, when he was 5 years old.
- . ME FFRTVR IS THEOSN: My favorite view is the ocean, by Andrew aged 5.

- . TOM WENT TO THE EPOT. THE PLAN MAD A FOSD LADIG: Tom went to the airport. The plane made a forced landing.
- . A small boy's version of Puff the Magic Dragon:

Pof The Majeck Jraon Lefd Bie The Se And Frolet In Te  
Otm Mese In A Land Cod On A Led Letol Jace Paepoh  
Love Tat Rasol Paf And Bort Hem Faz And Sele Wos  
And Los Of Fanse Saf Ho Paf The Majeck Jragnelefd Bie  
The Se And Frolet In Te Otm Mest In A Land Cod On  
A Led

These young writers have got an idea of spelling. It's just not the same idea as the dictionary. They like single letters for vowels and they condense words. They do not always hear sounds the way the books say, so train = CHRAN, and dragon = JRAON. GONA is a verb.

Children can come up with dozens of ways to misspell a word, but usually one way is the most popular. Margaret Peters collected several hundred ways that children misspell scissors but she found that sisers was more popular than all the others put together. It is close to the old medieval spelling sisours.

Here is a collage of the most popular spellings by 90 Year 5 children who were told they could spell a dictated story however they would like to spell, if they were the Master of Spelling.

Wuns upon a tim the butiful dauter of a grate  
magishan wonted mor perls to puut among her tresers.  
'Luk thru the senter of the moon wen it is blue' sed her  
muther in anser to her qestion. 'Yu mite find yor hart's  
desier.' The prinsess laft becos she douted thees werds.  
Insted, she yoused her imaginashin and muved into  
the fotografy buisness and tuk pichers of the moon in  
culur.

Here are the same children's worst misspellings when asked to spell the same dictation correctly:

Inc apud a tie de beaty dooer ov a gret muzian wunted

mo plls two pitt amog he teashs. Lok furv tha cernta ov  
the mon wen it is ble sad he moter in anwser to her  
geschon. Yu mayt faynd uor htres dirsie. The pinsec  
lufed because she dawit dees wuds. In sede she uzt her  
mange mashen and mofed intwo the furtogerfig  
becunase and tok pitass of the mon in calar.

Some of the worst spellers spelled more sensibly when they  
could spell as they liked than when they tried to spell the  
same words correctly.

### How people spelled when they could spell as they liked

The Anglo-Saxons and Chaucer probably spelled as they  
spoke. Standardised spelling began with printing, to  
communicate across dialects the length of Britain. Well-read  
writers were more likely to spell according to the print they  
read even if it was not like their own local speech, and used  
their own phonetics only for less familiar words. Then came  
the dictionaries with 'right spelling'.

Chaucer's spellings were not all quaint, but he switched  
around – 'in age was dwelling dale this of which I my tale  
day that she last simple two' (spelled tweye a few lines  
further on), 'three large sheep sooty many sauce no morsel.'  
The discerning reader may recognise that these spellings  
come from the opening lines of the Nonne Preestes Tale  
about Chaunticleer the cock.

Thomas Cartwright in 1590 spelled with inflexions now  
dropped off, but preferred brevity: – agast al badg becom  
befor blody blud bord brest brused carkas chuk chuse  
clense cok com cours crokin delite dich drery erly faining  
frends ful garding gon groning handl ...

Spellings of words often stayed the same when suffixes  
were added: dayly defyance doen (done) fyry gloriouslye  
layd manyfold prayes rejoyce slayn theyr tryall wisdom.

The same word could be spelled in different ways on the  
same page: assined – assynde; beauty – beauty; buisnes  
– busines; dreem – dremes; hainous – haynouse; obay –

obey; physition – phisition; publique – publike; shuld – shoulde; solemne – solempne. And sheepehardes – shepheards – sheepheard, all within six lines.

Spellings that we may be better off without included comptrouled eccho idyotes imbezelled ougly (ugly) oyle quyete roiallye saugh (saw) shoen (shone) sprinnckled stincking syxe wemens wikkedness wommanwyse yow. I think I like best bussiness, ougly, sprinnckled, stincking and wommanwyse. Roiallye has an antique glamour to it. The Queen in a hat can look royal, but never roiall.

## How people want to spell

‘Do you spell it with a V or a W?’ inquired the judge.  
‘That depends upon the taste and fancy of the speller, my Lord,’ replied Sam.

(Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*)

Pointers to how people want to spell are found on Internet bulletin boards, emails and teenagers’ chatrooms, in TXTMSGs, and in the spelling mistakes that are obstinately perpetrated however much punishment awaits. Richard Wade of Oxford has a website at [www.freespeling.com](http://www.freespeling.com), where everyone can record how they would like to spell. My research at parties, conferences, and Ideal Home Exhibitions finds that people have two ideas about how they want to spell – one is fantasy and the other is reality. Fantasy is longing to be free to spell ‘sensibly’. Reality is the desire to be socially acceptable.

A large number of research grants have been spent on the study of spelling mistakes. Dr Phillip Smith’s research on people’s ideas of spelling concluded that ‘the knowledge of spelling possessed by highly literate adults is likely to be a heterogeneous collection of generalisations’. In Victorian times, up to a third of primary schooling was taken up with spelling, but this dedication was acknowledged to be not always successful. I have a newspaper cutting complaining about the terribly low level of school leavers’ spelling in

Ballarat – when it was still sometimes spelled Ballararat – dated 1870.

Recently I found an old black-bound family book with the title Family Worship: a series of prayers with remarks on passages of sacred Scripture by clergymen of the Church of Scotland. Inside, facing the flyleaf, is a list of family birth-dates, beginning with Great-Grandfather Peter Keil, born 21st March 1818, and stopping at my grandfather's birth in 1854. The inside cover is inscribed 'Peter Keils Book' and around the edge of the page is written at different angles in an antique hand the words 'correspondence' 'suffocated suffocated' 'only lonely', 'lovlier lovelier', 'rely reely', 'hury ceas case', 'heaps heper' and other attempts to spell that have faded into illegibility. The pages of this holy book were used to call down help in spelling by the familiar and often desperate tactic to 'see if it looks right'.

'They can't spell to save themselves'

Phillip Adams once filled a six-column page of the Melbourne Age, 3 August 1977, with 383 different ways that Presbyterians identified themselves in the Australian Federal Census. As Adams pointed out, only one of the 383 spellings was correct. Here are 80 examples. In later censuses, Australians have been spared the mortification of trying to spell their religious denominations.

Prebesyteran	Presbeytatin	Prespateirtan
Prebyterten	Presbeyterian	Prespaterall
Preepyserian	Presbeytrian	Prespatetn
Preesbitrian	Presbitarian	Prespherallon
Pepesbyterian	Presbityrien	Prespbetartan
Preupetenian	Presbtyrian	Prespbeterian
Prepterian	Presbutterian	Prespebtitian
Prepation	Presbyeartan	Prespetterean
Presbatafion	Presbyettan	Prespenlion
Presbaterion	Presbyttersan	Prespetarien



Presbertain	Presbyterian	Prespeerion
Presbertartan	Presbystearen	Presoetian
Presbertiryian	Presbytian	Piespatirtan
Presbetirion	Presbytairtan	Prespetran
Presbertyan	Presbytarien	Prespetranion
Presbertyerian	Presbytearn	Presoetryan
Prosbestrian	Presbyteian	Prespetyrian
Pfesbetarian	Presbyteian	Prespotyryan
Presbeterion	Presbytenian	Prespeytenin
Presbetaryn	Presbyteon	Prespitan
Presbeteian	Presbyteran	Prespiterian
Presbeterian	Presbbieration	Prespitern
Presbetyrian	Presbyterean	Prespition
Presbetian	Presbyterian	Prespofterion
Presbatiran	Presbyterin	Prespoterian
Presbetirion	Preseyterlun	Prespolerten
Presbetryan	Presportelan	

### Acid opinions and spelling rage

‘Two centuries of dismay, vituperation and ridicule’

‘The centuries-long parade of the wit and wisdom of those who have attempted to disentangle the complex orthographic structure of English.’

(Vachek 1982)

[Pooh] respects Owl, because you can’t help respecting anyone who can spell Tuesday, even if he doesn’t spell it right; but spelling isn’t everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn’t count’.

(A.A. Milne)

‘I hope I never meet a man so narrow that he can spell a word in only one way.’

(Reportedly Andrew Jackson)

Here’s what some noted dictionary-makers and wordsmiths have said about English spelling:

Dr Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his Dictionary of 1755: ‘Every language has . . . its improprieties and absurdities, which it is the duty of the lexicographer to correct’.

Jacob Grimm, etymologist, of Grimm's Fairy Tales (1785–1863): 'Did not a whimsical, antiquated orthography stand in the way, the universality of [English as a world language] would be still more evident'.

Sir James Murray, first compiler of The Oxford English Dictionary, wrote of 'the waste of national resources incurred in the attempt to make child after child commit to memory the 20,000 contradictory facts of English spelling'.

In Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language. 'Neither the Anglo-Saxon orthography nor the Old French was distinguished for its regularity. But when the two were thrown together, the result was a mass of confusion and anomaly hardly paralleled, except, perhaps, in the spelling of the native Irish. It is not creditable to the English name, nor accordant with the practical spirit of the English people.' 'English orthography poorly fulfils the original and proper office of orthography, to indicate pronunciation; nor does it better fulfil the improper office, which some would assert for it, for a guide to etymology.' Noah Webster, the original compiler, campaigned for simpler spelling for a long time, before largely giving up.

H W Fowler, in *Modern English Usage*, 1926, complained of 'the notorious difficulty of English spelling, and the growing impatience caused by it. English had better be treated in the English way . . . amended in detail, here a little and there a little as absurdities become intolerable, till a result is attained that shall neither overburden schoolboys nor stultify intelligence nor outrage the scholar. In this book some modest attempts are made at cleaning up the more obtrusive untidinesses'.

Richard Venezky, doyen of experts on American English spelling: 'Everyone . . . has to admit that of all languages of culture English has the most antiquated, inconsistent and illogical spelling. Educators, philologists, and spelling reformers have from the darkest periods of the Middle Ages joined in the assault on the "antiquated", "inconsistent," and "illogical" spelling with which the English speaking world is burdened'. He then tried to justify it.

Psychologists and educators:

'English spelling is a continuous attempt at compromises.'

(Dr Uta Frith, psychologist)

'Unlike the orthographies of other major languages, modern English spelling preserves clear evidence of nearly 1,300 years of sound change, scribal tampering, partial reforms and foreign intrusion. There is an underlying pattern to this orthography . . . but there is also a substantial marginal mess which can only in part be organised into subpatterns.'

(D W Massaro, psycholinguist)

'It is unplanned, phonographically highly inconsistent, and historically, pragmatically and geographically fluid.'

(Christopher Upward, linguist)

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'I cannot accept the view that English has a good spelling no matter how close it comes to the latest fashion of analysis proposed by any particular school of linguistics.'

(Edgar Gregersen, linguistic anthropologist)

The Working Paper of the Committee for Linguistics in Education (Stubbs 1986) described the English spelling system as organized 'in sometimes non-obvious ways'.

### Personalise your spelling

Anyone can personalise their spelling, because your name is your own. You can spell your daughter's name Leissa. Then, when she is 21 she can be sure the personalised number plates on her birthday car will not be LISA385, although the practical costs of a remarkable spelling are often overlooked until you try to explain your name over the telephone to an overseas call centre.

Locals like their home towns to have a personalised

spelling that foreigners cannot pronounce correctly. This makes it easy to spot the incomers and treat them as they deserve. The English are famous for this – Salisbury, Worcester – you name it and you are likely to be wrong. Barchester Towers? Try Buster Taws. Australians scorn the Pom who says GEELong, and Wagga Wagga instead of ‘woggawogga’. The spelling of street names can have obscure origins. Waimarie Drive, for example, is not Australian aboriginal; the folklore is that two pioneer ladies in the district thought they had named their home Via Maria. Others think it is Maori for water. But would you prefer your street to have an unspellable name or just a number?

People tiptoe to avoid offence with surnames. Even Smith can be Smyth, Smythe or Shmith. P G Wodehouse – the innocent are told the pronunciation is Woodhouse – invented a character who spelled himself Psmith, and this was very funny. A few years ago the Aberdeen telephone book listed eight McGonagalls, spelled seven different ways. One is the spelling for the world’s famous worst poet. Now multicultural telephone directories are a fund of unique spellings from Aashish to Zzymons.

A surprisingly recent problem is how to write to someone whose name might be spelled Mackay, Mckay, Mackie, Mckie, M’Cay . . . when it can be pronounced as arbitrarily as Makigh, Mak-ay, Makee or Macky. They were once all one clan, a job lot, and spelled themselves anyhow. A pioneer relative spelled his name variously as MacDonald, McDonald and Macdonald in the same letter.

The Victorians spelled their plain names even plainer, with Geo, Thos, Jno, Chas and Wm. Parents today express the uniqueness of their child in names like Willyum or Dezzray. If you are a really serious personality, you can become an acronym – FDR, GBS, RLS, HRH ...

### The spelling ethic

Lord Chesterfield, 1694–1773, a top snob, turned spelling correctness into one-upmanship. ‘Orthography in the true sense of the word is so absolutely necessary for a

gentleman'. He warned his son that 'one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life'. The poor lad disappointed him orthographically as in other ways.

'Bad' originally meant criminal or moral offences. Today people have bad consciences for not sticking to a diet. In between, people have felt bad about being bad spellers. Etiquette in the 1800s considered that ignorance of correct spelling was 'a mark of ill-breeding, defective education or natural stupidity'. Perfect spelling enshrined virtues that the Victorians held dear:

The heritage of civilisation (Etymology)  
Beauty (Aesthetics)  
Pragmatism (Whatever is, is right)  
Discipline (Virtue).

According to the Victorians, 'Slipshod spelling arises from slipshod thinking, which arises from slipshod moral ideals.' 'Spelling is pride. Spelling is social acceptance. Spelling is discipline. Spelling isn't an isolate'.

'A boy that is good will learn his book well,  
and if he can't read, will strive for to spell.'  
(Nursery rhyme)

A sense of inferiority lies at the edge of consciousness for almost all literate English-speakers, because even if you can do everything else quite well enough, only one in ten thousand can ever, ever spell well enough.

## Spelling and society

Five hundred years ago, a Korean King, Sejong the Great, 'took pity on the common people and wished they could express their thoughts in writing'. Only the powerful mandarins could read their difficult Chinese script. As was to be expected, the embassy he sent abroad to find a better writing system could not find anything they thought good enough for Koreans, so they invented their own. It fits the Korean language well, and is like three writing systems in

one. Letters are cleverly arranged into syllables which block into words. But as soon as King Sejong died, the mandarins banned his new Great Letters, on the very grounds that they enabled the common people to read and write. Only the Korean court ladies, barred from education, kept using 'Hangul' to write each other letters and stories.

Four hundred years on, Hangul became a symbol of nationalism against foreign conquerors. Westerners liked it too because it was so easy. You can learn to read in the Korean writing system in less than a day. I did.

As soon as Korea was freed after World War II, Hangul was made the national writing system. Korea was still semi-medieval and poverty-stricken. The capital city of 4 million people still had mud houses with thatched roofs and four-watt lighting, and daily lines of ox-carts took the sewage to the fields. But now South Korea has leapt into almost universal literacy, and, with a little help from its friends, has become a front rank industrial democracy. Koreans celebrate Spelling Day on 9 October and have even made public holidays of it, because they are so joyful and proud to have such an easy writing system.

Language has two uses. To bring people together, and to keep them out. You can use a writing system to communicate with other people, or you can make sure everyone can't use it. This has been the case throughout recorded history. One story tells it all.

English spelling might look like this if it was written like Korean.

## 6 It's Thyme U Gnu

'Simplified spelling brought about sunspots, the San Francisco earthquake, and the recent business depression, which we never would have had if spelling had been left all alone.' Mark Twain, speech to Associated Press, 1906.

The aim of the Royal Spanish Academy of Language, 1714 (The Real Academia Española de la Lengua): To purify, fix and give splendour to the language and its spelling.

'Not in my time, O Lord.' An understandable response to any change.

Here we offer laughs – not toil, sweat or tears. Be spell unbound.

### Spelling for fun

Spelling is a good field for fun – jokes and puns, limericks, cartoons, shaggy dog stories, one-upmanship and inverse snobbery, anarchism and pedantry, antiquarianism and originality, curiosity and surprise, games and paradox, nonsense and satire, and going over the top.

It is hard to credit, but there are serious conferences on Humor, and some academics seriously claim that sex and violence are the only sources of humour. What about spelling? Can spelling be sexy, lubricious or lustful? We can try. Can spelling crimes be committed? Perhaps yes. Spelling is a road everyone must travel to be literate, but it has a bar that only some can pass. The less fit and able, the harder they find the barrier.

Go off and invent your own English spelling, if you like. You can do it in an afternoon. Many do. Correspond with your friends, writing English in Tolkien's Middle Earth spelling, if you are at school. Write a letter to The Times, if you are English. But by now, you will never confuse our treasury of the English language with how it is spelled. Spelling is only the pen for writing it. Spelling is only a tool to communicate. Like any human tool, it can be improved by human engineering.

### Spelling for communication

After a hundred years of research on what is wrong with those who fail the task, it is time for research to improve the

task, so that fewer fail it.

You know now that English is about the only modern language in the world that has not made some major or minor reform of its writing system in the past 150 years. If you want to know why English reform has still not succeeded, basically the answer is that it has been making the wrong assumptions and looking in the wrong directions. Like all the people who tried to fly by waving their wings instead of studying aerodynamics.

The first known attempt at reforming English spelling was by a medieval monk called Orme, hundreds of years ago. Much later, the 19th century was a peak period for ideas of spelling reform because so many other reforms were being made – slaves were being freed, education made free, voting extended, and the world changed by science. The linguists, philologists, phoneticists and other eminent scholars who founded English and American simplified spelling societies understandably assumed that improving English spelling would be a pushover. Thousands of the great and good, with dictionary-makers in the lead, petitioned from universities, the professions and the arts. Simplified Spelling Society members and office-holders included H G Wells, Andrew Carnegie, Sir Charles Darwin, Gilbert Murray, Sir James Murray, the publisher Israel Gollancz, and an Archbishop of Canterbury. The American reform campaigners have included Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain and several Deweys. American spelling differs now from English by a few hundred words, partly due to Noah Webster, and partly because President Theodore Roosevelt ordered a list of 500 re-spellings, and some of them stuck. Among the revolutionary social reforms in Britain immediately after World War 2 was a Parliamentary Bill for spelling reform in 1949. It was defeated by three votes. A second Bill in 1953 was sidestepped by the initial teaching alphabet experiment. Not many people know about this.

One reason for failure to reform has been the social function of difficult spelling as an advantage for the privileged, which has counterbalanced the need for mass



literacy.

A second reason has been that almost everyone assumes that any improved spelling must be 'spelling as you speak' – but schemes on these lines simply won't work in a world full of English dialects. Ridicule follows, and jokes by sub-editors. Educated people may fear having to relearn the whole pitiable process.

However, breakthroughs are possible when spelling is understood as representing the English language, which is more than just its speech sounds, and when reformers look at modern research about what users and learners really need from a writing system.

A third reason is that spelling is like spit. The psychologist Gordon Allport has pointed out that everybody can tolerate their own spit, but is revolted by everyone else's. Until you become familiar with a spelling change, it can seem spittable.

Yet it would be possible to keep English spelling looking pretty much as it is, by applying the 8 morphological and phonemic principles briefly revealed in the Sealed Sexion of Chapter 3. They make possible spelling-without-traps for reading, spelling-withouttraps for reading aloud with an accent guide for learners, and spelling-without-traps for writing and initial learning that does not bother about the alternative options.

Today the English language belongs to the world, not just to the English. The rest of the world has a claim for an international standardised English spelling. It cannot be owned by the small elite who sorrow over those who cannot spell accommodation or broccoli. If they want difficult initiations and exclusiveness, they can keep their antiquarian delights for themselves. The difficulties of its writing system risk the English language losing out as the effective lingua franca of the world, with reports that its use is declining by 15% per year. Reserch and Development makes rapid and well-funded progress in all other tecnologies of comunication. It is time for grants for human engineering in spelling, and for an International English Spelling Commission – rather than yet another Spelling Bee.

What would not publishers and writers do to extend their reading markets beyond present readers, or test the waters to do so, if they realised it was as possible as radio communication from Mars?

'To argue that what has not occurred will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of mankind.'

Mahatma Gandhi.

## Reading onward

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- Internet sources for further information on spelling and writing systems of the world include <http://>

[home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas](http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas), <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/spelling.htm> and <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/writsys.htm>.