Frequently Asked Questions

How should I teach children to spell the common exception words?

Common exception words – often referred to as 'tricky' words – are exceptions because their grapheme-phoneme correspondences are not in line with what one might expect. It follows, therefore, that you need to focus on the tricky bits in these words. Emphasise all the parts of the word that children can already spell easily: do not give them the impression that the whole word is tricky – just certain parts of it that they need to look out for.

The National Curriculum non-statutory guidance for reading in Year 1 says:

> "The number, order and choice of exception words taught will vary according to the phonics programme being used. Ensuring that pupils are aware of the GPCs they contain, however unusual these are, supports spelling later".

DfE (September 2013) The National Curriculum in England (Framework Document). London: DfE, © Crown Copyright 2013.

Should I ask a child to check whether a word 'looks right'?

Yes, this is a good strategy, especially for older children. This type of visual imaging is useful when considering the end-product, i.e. to check that the word is spelled correctly rather than to spell the word in the first place. Jager Adams quotes research that shows that "the capacity for visual imagery differs substantially among individuals". So, it might be the case that this form of checking works better for some children than for others.

Another interesting finding, also reported in Beginning to Read, is that when strong spellers are asked to proofread, they are "significantly more likely" to notice that what we call 'silent letters' have been left out than letters where the sounds are pronounced. So, for example, children would be more likely to notice the missing 'b' in 'lam[b]' than the missing 'p' in 'lam[p]'.

Jager Adams, M. (1990) Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

What is the best way of assessing and recording progress in spelling?

The most effective way of assessing and recording children's attainment and progress in spelling will vary in different schools. *A Week of Teaching Spelling,* provides some guidance as to how one school structures spelling. When devising a system for assessing spelling, you may wish to consider that:

- assessment of a child's spelling should be linked to the age-related expectations
- assessments should take into account spelling in day-to-day writing across the curriculum, not just in a spelling test
- assessment of spelling should be diagnostic, enabling the teacher to learn where misconceptions exist for individual children, groups and the whole class, enabling him or her to address these through targeted teaching.

Children should be offered formative feedback to help them improve and have the opportunity to make corrections or learn from any mistakes they make.

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Does a weekly spelling test help children to develop their spelling?

Many schools successfully use weekly spelling tests, but one issue with them is where children go home and dutifully learn their list of ten words, spell them correctly in the test, and then promptly forget.

At Key Stage 1, it may be that the children do not need to take spelling lists home to learn as teaching spelling and practice happen as part of their daily phonics teaching. However, younger children could be given lists of 'tricky' words for their year group to practise in the context of their writing at home and to support parents/carers to help their children when writing.

In Key Stage 2, another model might be to divide any statutory requirements for spelling into a number of lists featuring example words, which the children are given at the start of each half-term. The words on the list could be organised by features of their morphology, orthography or etymology that they have in common.

Children then take the wordlist home and spend some time each week learning their spelling words. The children are given a weekly spelling test of 8–10 words, but:

- They might be tested on any word on their list, meaning they cannot simply learn it for one week and then forget it.
- They might be asked to spell any other word that is not on their list, but can be spelled by generalising from the words they have already learned.

This means that children are expected to use their knowledge of root words to spell other words derived from them, for example, using decide to spell decision. The children are given each word in the context of a sentence, so that they can learn to choose the correct spelling where there are any homophones (e.g. aloud, allowed). This approach also supports vocabulary development.

The expectation is not that children get every word correct (although, as they reach the end of the half-term, their weekly scores improve towards this), but that they improve steadily each week, learning from the words they have got wrong. Children are given the opportunity to rewrite any word they have not spelled correctly in the test, looking at how it is structured and considering any principles of spelling that would help them to remember it.

Does doing corrections help children to learn to spell?

If it is the child's own spelling that is incorrect, the answer is certainly yes, although how many words you ask the child to correct will depend very much on your professional judgement and other factors, including:

- the child's age and the stage of their spelling development/phonic knowledge
- how close their spelling was to the correct version
- whether the word was a 'tricky word' that they should have known how to spell
- the overall context and drafting stage of the writing.

Ideally, with the youngest children, you should discuss the errors with them. With all children, at whatever age, you should comment positively on their spelling before drawing attention to the part of the word that the child got wrong. The best practice would be to make sure that the child understands how the mistake occurred, and not simply that the word was spelled incorrectly. It is vital that, in correcting the spelling, the child should write out the whole word and not just the part that was wrong.

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What is a spelling journal and what might it contain?

A spelling journal is a booklet where children can record and explore spelling in English lessons, through their wider reading and across the curriculum. It might simply be a working book to record interesting words or tricky spellings, like a homemade dictionary. It might also include:

- space for tricky words that have to be learned
- a mini-dictionary covering commonly misspelled words
- space for word investigations based on the etymology or morphology of words
- a section for you to record words that might be useful in children's writing (words to use instead of 'said' or interesting descriptive words, for example)
- a section for topic words which children have encountered across the curriculum or through their wider reading
- it might even include games and challenges to support children's spelling in a fun way.

School Improvement Pathways on Oxford Owl

The above questions and responses have been taken from a larger collection of questions that are part of the *Improving Spelling Pathway*.

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