

Important Concepts for Understanding Spelling

Introduction

English is a wonderful language, constantly changing, evolving and growing. Over the centuries it has borrowed words, phrases and ideas from languages across the globe. English allows us to share ideas in the most beautiful way, communicating with precision; choosing the exact word for a specific idea or moment.

English gives us a wonderfully rich palette with which to express ourselves – official estimates suggest that there are a quarter of a million distinct words in the English language. Counting different meanings of the same word and including archaic words that are no longer in use, that figure rises to more than a million.

Learning to spell each word individually probably isn't the best approach, but as luck would have it, there are a few concepts that can help with learning to spell:

- **Phonics:** the sounds of language and the letters and groups of letters that represent them
- **Orthography:** the conventions we use to turn a spoken language into a written one
- **Morphology:** the units of meaning that make up the words we use
- **Etymology:** the history and origin of words and how they've changed over time

As well as helping with spelling, understanding these concepts can help us to read and work out the meaning of unfamiliar words. When presented with a potentially challenging word, we can break it down into smaller parts and then use our knowledge of etymology and morphology to try to understand it.

Phonics

When we're thinking about English spelling, the first and most obvious place to start is with the phonemes that are represented in writing by different graphemes. Although this is part of a language's orthography (see next section), as teaching early reading through phonics is familiar to many teachers, it is useful to consider its link to spelling separately from wider orthography.

Selecting the grapheme (the right letter or group of letters) to represent a particular sound is the key to good spelling. This ability to hear, manipulate and use individual sounds is called phonemic awareness. Building this strong phonic knowledge gives children a foundation for spelling English words. However, because English has quite a complex history as a language, often the same graphemes can represent different phonemes in different words, and sometimes it can be difficult for a child to make sense of what's going on, so choosing the right grapheme to represent a particular phoneme is sometimes easier said than done. Learning how English orthography works, and using our knowledge of morphology and etymology can help to unlock spelling.

Orthography

The key to spelling is using the right letters to represent the sounds in the word we're trying to write. English spelling is sometimes portrayed as being irregular or random because the different sounds in a word can be represented in more than one way. However, if you delve a little below the surface, there is evidence of a logical system there.

Orthography is the set of conventions for how we turn a spoken language into a written one. It can include spelling, punctuation, and the use of language features such as capital letters. It even includes where placing the emphasis in a particular word changes the meaning (such as *object* or *record*), but we'll stick to thinking about spelling.

Orthography is about the coding system of any language, not just English. Since English has taken on words from other languages, we have also taken on their orthographies: the /sh/ sound at the start of 'chef' is spelt 'ch' because it uses French orthography (i.e. the French alphabetic code) but we spell the same /sh/ sound as 'sh' in 'shell', 'shall' or 'shawl' because those words use English orthography.

Orthography can be helpful when we're trying to choose how to represent a particular sound as a grapheme, a letter or group of letters. Often it comes down to a question of position. The place in the word where a phoneme appears can tell us a lot about the grapheme we need to choose.

Orthography is a useful concept to understand spelling, but unlike morphology and etymology, it might not be something we need to teach children explicitly. Much of children's knowledge of orthography will be 'caught', rather than 'taught', with an understanding of how we represent different sounds developed through phonics teaching and wider reading.

Morphology

If phonemes are the units of sound in language, morphemes are the smallest units of meaning, the units of grammar and syntax. Every word in English is made up of one or more morphemes. A morpheme can be an individual root word, such as 'cat' or 'happy'. These are called free morphemes – they make sense on their own.

In contrast, bound morphemes need to be attached to something else to make sense. These might be a root, the basis of a word, or the prefixes or suffixes that join onto a root. Each bound morpheme has its own meaning, but it needs to join together and work with another morpheme – we can't use it on its own.

Adding two morphemes together might produce an inflection of the original word – like adding an 's' to turn cat into cats. Adding the 's' changes the meaning and tells us there is now more than one cat. Or it might create a new word altogether – adding 'un' to change happy to unhappy.

Changing root words to make new words or new inflections of the original word, and learning how suffixes and prefixes join with roots is a key skill in understanding English spelling. Knowledge of root words can also help when a word isn't spelled using the most obvious set of graphemes to represent the sounds, for example, knowing that *science*, *conscious*, and *conscience* all share the same Latin root can help us to remember how they are spelled. Most importantly, thinking about morphology helps children to make a link between meaning and spelling, supporting the development of comprehension and vocabulary, in addition to becoming a strong speller.

Etymology

Etymology is the study of the origins of words. This includes their history, and how their form and meaning has changed over time. Sometimes knowing a word's etymology, its history and origins, can be the key to making sense of a word's spelling.

A word's etymology can help to explain why it is spelled in a particular way. This is useful for spelling words that have their origins in other languages and words that make use of graphemes that aren't the ones we're expecting. For example, knowing the Greek 'aer' (which means 'air') would help children to remember how to spell *aeroplane*, *aerodynamic*, *aerosol* and *aerobic*.