

Linguistic Inquiry

in the Junior School



ST PETERS
GIRLS



Thinking Differently About Spelling

Learning to spell in English is anything but natural or intuitive. While the English language has existed for only around 1500 years, its roots are far older, with an evolution that has involved multiple cultural, geographical, political, linguistic and sociological influences.

As a result, we have a language with 26 letters yet 44 speech sounds, many hundreds of letter combinations that represent those sounds, and several different ways to spell the same sound. There is no wonder that for many children, the act of learning to spell is a complex and confusing maze.

The difficulty with rote learning alone

It is suggested that a fluent speaker of English has an active vocabulary of anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000+ words. If we were to set out learning to spell just 10,000 words by rote over the seven years of primary school, we would need to learn a list of 40 words during every week of schooling. Even if this were feasible, the rote learning method is unlikely to engender a love of the language, nor facilitate the ability to pluck the correct spelling back out of our memory when required.

In fact, for some students, the process of learning to spell by rote learning lists of words alone is similar to being asked to learn strings of random digits and then recall them at will. You could liken this to trying to remember randomly generated passwords!

The need for a deeper approach

Rote learning lists of words, using visual memory and basic phonics alone are not the most effective ways to learn how to spell in English. Without a deeper understanding of phonology (sound patterns within words), English orthography (the common spelling conventions/patterns of the language), morphology (the meaning of roots, stems and affixes of a word), and etymology (the history of the word and how its meaning has changed over time), students simply don't have a strong enough repertoire of knowledge, skills and strategies to remember the spelling of all words they've previously learned, or spell previously unlearned words with a greater chance of accuracy.

Our English vocabulary contains a rich tapestry of background influences and its spelling is complex as a result. For this reason, and following evidence-based research into the efficacy of a multidimensional approach to teaching spelling, teachers at St Peter's Girls' School are developing learning sequences that encourage rich and deep investigation and inquiry into words and the way they are spelled.

Becoming 'linguistic inquirers'

Our students will develop the tools to be competent linguistic inquirers. This will involve:

- Learning the 'language of the language' – they will learn the correct terminology to describe parts of language, leading to improved acquisition of higher-level English skills, as well as any foreign language that they learn.
- Improving their understanding of the phonology of English – learning to hear the 44 speech sounds (phonemes) and also understanding common phoneme patterns in English (e.g. the way in which the plural ending 's' and 'es' sound different at the end of **socks**, **leaves** and **dishes**)
- Expanding their understanding of the multiple ways the phonemes of English are represented by combinations of letters (graphemes). E.g. the multiple graphemic representations of the same sound in **play**, **main**, **tape**, **hey**, **great**, **straight** and **eight**.
- Inquiring into the morphology of words (the smallest units of meaning within a word) – finding the base words, prefixes and suffixes within a word and investigating what these mean, leading to an expanded vocabulary, a better ability to predict the meaning and spelling of new words, and improved reading comprehension.
- Inquiring into a word's etymology (the history of the word) – discovering where the word originated, how its meaning, pronunciation or spelling has changed over time, and how it relates to other words through past connections. This includes investigating Latin and Greek roots as well as connections with other languages.
- Deepening their understanding of the orthography (spelling system) of English – learning about the common spelling patterns we use and where in a word they are likely to appear (e.g. 'ck' is seen at the end of words, such as '**duck**', or in the middle, such as in '**chicken**' but it is never going to be a correct spelling choice at the beginning of a word).



Teaching linguistically correct information

We have 26 letters, but we use 44 sounds. For this reason, teaching early phonics as it has been taught during recent decades is not a sustainable method for learning to read or spell. Our youngest students will not be taught that each letter has a direct correlation with a sound, as this is linguistically incorrect and not sustainable.

For example, they will not be misinformed that the letter 'Aa' sounds like the beginning of **ant** and **apple** or that the letter 'Yy' sounds like the beginning of '**yellow**' and '**yawn**'. This only serves to confuse the reading and writing process later on, when in English, the letters 'Aa' and 'Yy' (and indeed all letters), either alone or together with other letters, can represent a number of different sounds.

Consider the sounds represented by the letter 'Aa' in 'cake', '**banana**', 'swan', 'hair' and 'fall', or the sounds represented by the letter 'Yy' in 'city', '**fly**' and 'pyramid'.

Instead, students will learn about the 44 speech sounds of English and their most common spelling choices, and continue to expand their knowledge of less common spelling choices within the context of words they need and use on a daily basis.

Correct terminology for sustainable learning

Current educational research tells us that programs resulting in learning that is sustainable over the longer term use and teach correct terminology. However this terminology has not necessarily been introduced in Australian classrooms in recent years, and your daughter may start using language with which you are not yet familiar. She may come home talking about phonemes, graphemes, digraphs, trigraphs, diphthongs or diphones. She may talk about the 20 vowel sounds in relation to the positions and methods in which these are made in the mouth, not merely by the letters (a, e, i, o, u) that serve as vowel indicators.

Please encourage her as she explores spelling in deeper and richer ways and enjoy the learning journey together. A glossary of terms has been included at the end of this booklet for your interest.

Putting it all together

Every word in English represents a story - a mini lesson in history, geography, linguistics, sociology and politics. We rely on patterns and meaning to learn anything new; therefore, when teaching spelling, we will be encouraging our students to 'hunt for treasure' and investigate all of these aspects of our language in order to think critically about the words they are learning to spell. There will be a strong emphasis on *teaching* and not just *learning* spelling.

Words will be studied in context, with opportunities to investigate their origins, meanings, and parts. Students will develop a deep understanding of the sounds and symbols of English and they will use the tools of THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills) to improve their knowledge of the orthography of the English language.

Home learning

Spelling homework may look different than it has in the past, as students will be asked to investigate words in new ways, increasing their understanding of the vast web of vocabulary we have at our disposal and deepening their understanding of connections between words.

Our aim is for students to learn how to spell words within the context of their writing, and to stretch their capabilities by expanding their vocabularies, not merely memorise words for a weekly test, only to forget them when needed in the context of writing later on.

Please encourage your daughter to be a spelling detective and treasure hunter, and find opportunities to help her investigate the origins, meanings and connections of words.

We are very much looking forward to incorporating multidimensional approaches to spelling instruction, and helping our students use a linguistic inquiry approach to investigate and learn the vocabulary and spelling of English.

Suzanne Haddy
Head of Junior School



Glossary of terms

Orthography - The spelling system of a language.

Grapheme - A spelling choice – either a graph, digraph, trigraph or quadgraph.

Phoneme - A speech sound. The smallest unit of speech to make a difference to the meaning of a word, e.g. the pronunciation of the words chip and ship.

Vowel - A phoneme produced without a complete closure of the mouth or restriction of the air flow. In English, all vowels are voiced.

Consonant - A phoneme produced by the closure or narrowing of the vocal tract, causing a restriction or complete blockage of air flow. The air flow can be modified using the teeth, tongue, lips or palate. In English, consonants are either voiced or unvoiced.

Graph - One letter representing one phoneme, e.g. 't' in the word knight.

Digraph - Two letters representing one phoneme, e.g. 'k' 'n' in the word **kn**ight.

Trigraph - Three letters representing one phoneme, e.g. 'i' 'g' 'h' in the word **night**.

Quadgraph - Four letters representing one phoneme, e.g. 'e' 'i' 'g' 'h' in the word **eight**.

Split digraph – where the pair of letters in a digraph (2 letter spelling choice) are not adjacent but split by a consonant (o_e in **hope**, a_e in **cake**).

Diphthong - a sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable, in which the sound begins as one vowel and moves towards another. The tongue (and/or other parts of the mouth) moves during the pronunciation of the vowel (as in **coin**, **cow**, **way**)

Monophthong - A vowel sound formed by which the tongue and other speech organs are relatively fixed from the beginning to end of the articulation (as in **bed**, **top**, **book**).

Diphone - One letter that represents two phonemes, e.g. 'x' box.

Blend - Two or more consonant phonemes said consecutively within the same syllable set in a word (**block**, **crab**, **split**).

Syllable - A beat (in a word) that contains a vowel phoneme.

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) - An international code used for guidance on pronunciation. IPA symbols are often found next to dictionary entries.

Terminology associated with the THRASS resources

THRASS words - The 120 words used to illustrate the 120 graphemes on the THRASS chart.

Key graphemes - The bolded text in each of the THRASS words on the chart.

Key phonemes - The 44 phonemes of English, represented on the THRASS chart.

Grapheme catch-all (GCA) – represented by an asterisk on the THRASS chart, indicating that there are additional less frequently used spelling choices for that phoneme not included on the chart.

Further reading

Adoniou, M. 2017. *Spelling it Out: How words work and how to teach them*.

Adoniou, M. 2013. *Why some kids can't spell and why spelling tests won't help*. <http://theconversation.com/why-some-kids-cant-spell-and-why-spelling-tests-wont-help-20497>

Crystal, D. 2013. *Spell it out: The singular story of English spelling*.

Siegel L. 2008. *Morphological awareness skills of English language learners and children with dyslexia*. *Topics in language disorders*.

To, N, Tighe E and Binder K. 2016. *Investigating morphological awareness and the processing of transparent and opaque words in adults with low literacy skills and in skilled readers*.