Empower students to be able to spell for life!

By Christine Killey. Chris is a qualified teacher with over twenty-five years’ experience. Chris has completed a Post Graduate Diploma and Masters in Special Education and is a trained Literate for Life—LEM Phonics instructor. She was the coordinator of SPELD Victoria for eight years and she has run a Special Education business for the past eighteen years. Chris is a regular presenter for Pearson, Learning Difficulties Australia and SPELD, and she has presented at many international conferences. She has written several books to help teach and reinforce grammar, spelling and mathematics, using games, dice and songs, to ensure all teachers and students can enjoy and understand the English language.

Look, cover, write—GUESS = NO! We need to be teaching our students how to spell each word and remember it for life, rather than memorising it for a test only.

How often do you hear a teacher or parent say, ‘My student gets ten out of ten for spelling each week, but is unable to spell the new word correctly the next day or in everyday writing’?

WHY? Because the student is memorising these words; research has shown that 40 per cent of students are very good at memorising words. The look, cover, write, check method is teaching this, but our students need to be explicitly taught how to spell.

It is a similar concept to remembering the amount of kilometres on the car speedometer with a petrol card. The amount goes into the short-term memory and if the service-station attendant asks ‘Would you like some chocolate or how has your day been?’, the speedometer reading is forgotten. Once the number has been given, if asked what it is ten minutes later, there is no recollection.

The English language is complex, but it does make sense when the correct building blocks are clearly taught and built on. Over 80 per cent of our words do follow consistent rules.

National curriculum objectives for spelling, 2012

Teaching strategies

Pupils should be taught to:

1. write each letter of the alphabet
2. use their knowledge of sound–symbol relationships and phonological patterns (for example, consonant clusters and vowel phonemes)
3. recognise and use simple spelling patterns
4. write common-letter strings
5. spell common words
6. spell words with common prefixes and inflectional endings
7. check the accuracy of their spelling, using word banks and dictionaries
8. use their knowledge of word families of similar words to identify reasons for misspellings
**Student objectives**

- understand which letter symbol will make each sound—phonemic awareness (1 & 2 above)
- say and break the word into syllables (3 above)
- understand that every syllable must contain a vowel sound
- analyse and understand the rules or strategies attached to the word being taught (6 above)
- understand what the word means
- understand how to use the word in their writing (grammar)
- apply the same concept to other words with the same word family or rule concept (4 & 5 above)

We teach words one way for **spelling** and one way for **reading**. These are two completely different skills so need to be taught differently.

When we teach a word for spelling we are ‘encoding the word’. We hear the word and we need to be able to identify each sound correctly to write the correct letter/symbol for that sound. For example: **wed/nes/day, stom/ach**.

When we read, we are ‘decoding the word’—we are reading the symbol and understanding what sound the symbol says. We read the word as it sounds: **wensday, stumic**.

Every time students learn a new word, we are teaching them how to spell and read it.

**These are the essential spelling strategies and rules.**

Teaching the alphabet and the sounds of letters are crucial for successful spelling practice. This needs to be constantly revised throughout the school years. Words don’t often start with the name of a consonant. For example, cat sounds like it starts with ‘k’ not ‘cee’ as the spelt name suggests. The strategies above will help student understanding. Cat has three sounds: c, a, t. Each letter says its sound.

Students need to be taught that a syllable is a single unit of sound that contains a vowel sound. If you place your hand under your chin and say the word in syllables, your jaw will drop if there is a vowel sound. Try **ta/ble**—your jaw will drop twice.

The vowels are: ‘a’, ‘e’, ‘i’, ‘o’, ‘u’ and ‘y’. The letter ‘i’ is not allowed at the end of an English word so the letter ‘y’ takes its place. ‘Y’ is considered a vowel when at the end of a syllable.

The vowels will say consistent sounds depending on where they are placed in a syllable.

When one vowel is followed by one consonant, the vowel will say its sound (**at, met, it, on** and **up**). These are referred to as **closed syllables**.
The vowels ‘a’, ‘e’, ‘o’ or ‘u’ usually say their names/long sounds at the end of a syllable (na/vy, me, o/pen, mu/sic). These are referred to as open syllables. This rule helps students know how to divide unfamiliar vowel–consonant words and then pronounce the word correctly. For example, re/port rather than rep/ort.

The letter ‘q’ is always followed by ‘u’ and together they say ‘kw’. The ‘u’ is not considered a vowel here (queen).

Explicitly teach that every time the letter ‘c’ is followed by an ‘e’, ‘i’ or ‘y’, it says ‘s’ (cent, city, cycle). There are NO exceptions. This helps to read 5000 words. But when followed by any other letter it will say ‘k’ (cat, cot, cut). This helps understand why we must use the ‘k’ symbol in a word such as ‘like’ because if we used the ‘c’ it would say ‘lice’.

The letter ‘g’ before ‘e’, ‘i’ or ‘y’ may say either ‘g’ or ‘j’ (get, girl, give; page, giant, gym), but followed by any other letters it says ‘g’ (gate, go, gust).

This short article only contains a few examples of the consistent rules in our written language. There are over thirty more. When spelling is taught comprehensively, with meaning and built on, students feel empowered and feel confident about spelling new words. They are taught to analyse the word for understanding, rather than for short-term memorisation. The new word will have a much better chance of being spelt correctly in future use.