

HOW TO LEARN TO SPELL

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How to Learn to Spell by O. E. Latham

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LEARN TO SPELL**

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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CHICAGO
ATKINSON & MENTZER

PREFACE.

"When I see a word I know not how to pronounce it; when I hear a word I know not how to spell it."

The above remark, made by one of America's greatest scholars, conveys an ineffable sadness, a sadness enhanced by the consciousness that in the teaching of English the budding soul must be grooved along irrational lines. Thus, at the outset, the reasoning faculty is seriously benumbed, a condition from which one never wholly recovers.

The indictment against our present alphabet and its uses contains charges of deeper import than the question of spelling; but "a condition, not a theory, confronts us," our problem is to teach spelling while using the present alphabet.

The art of reading is so important that a method of teaching reading has been diligently sought. Years of thought and discussion have been given to the subject. Teachers, to-day, can knowingly lead pupils into the art of thought expression. True, formerly, children learned to read, but progress was slow; teachers not having acquired a definite consciousness of what to do did much that tended to retard rather than promote the object in view; now, the task of teaching reading is essayed with perfect confidence; teachers have a definite knowledge of the step to be taken. Some prefer to teach sounds,

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through sounds teach words, then teach reading; others prefer to teach words as wholes, then teach reading; others prefer to teach reading, then teach words. All teach reading in the same way. They differ in their estimates of the amount and the kind of foundation advisable; they differ in the device used, and in personal force; but they do not differ in method of teaching reading.

The teaching of spelling has never received such serious attention. In a general way, the teaching of spelling is regarded as an endless task and a hopeless problem.

Success in the training of children to recognize words as wholes for reading purposes has brought into use the word-by-word plan of teaching spelling. It has been assumed that attention given to the recognition of words is attention given to spelling; it has been assumed that the mental process in learning to spell is the same as the mental process in learning to pronounce words at sight. But results in spelling have not been satisfactory.

When no attention is given to spelling aside from that given to reading, the spelling vocabulary increases slowly. When to spelling as a separate exercise time is given, in amount equal to that given to reading, the spelling vocabulary still lags far behind the reading vocabulary. The gap between these two vocabularies should lead us to question our method of teaching spelling.

In learning to talk a word is mastered as a unit; in one's first effort at writing words each letter is a unit. Were we to omit two and three letter words from the count in summing the words on a page of reading matter,

learning to spell the remaining words, if taught by the word method, would be many times as difficult as learning to pronounce them. Fortunately, in spite of the method, children unconsciously assimilate many of the uniformities of our language; aided by these uniformities, the gap between the two vocabularies, though conspicuous, is not so wide as it otherwise would be.

The word-by-word method of teaching spelling is faulty:

1. It violates a law of economy.

(It attempts to teach each word as a unit unrelated to other words in spelling. At once, it brings a child face to face with a lawless, an endless, and a hopeless task.)

2. It violates a law of mind.

(It attempts to supplant an ear image of a word and substitute there-for an eye image. A child speaks his native tongue before he reads. Word images are at first ear images. By law of apperception, new ideas are interpreted by, and coalesce with, pre-existing ideas. It follows that the eye image must coalesce with the ear image, the ear image being the base. Children lacking the sense of sound may be trained to spell well by a method adapted to the defect. The normal child cannot be so trained. The normal child has a consciousness arising from the sense of sound that interferes with any plan of training adapted to the defective.)

Any successful plan of teaching the normal child to spell must conform to the following propositions:

1. The learner must be given a definite state of consciousness which is to serve him as a standard.

(But few minds can retain unorganized knowledge. To organize knowledge, the mind must have an interpreting standard around which to group likenesses and differences.)

2. The spelling standard, at base, must be an ear consciousness.

(Since words are at first ear images, the mind must interpret a written word in terms of sound.

Since, in one's first effort at writing, each letter arouses a unit of consciousness, the mind will make an effort to interpret each letter in terms of sound. This effort produces an indefinite phonic consciousness. An indefinite phonic sense hampers, rather than assists, one in spelling. It follows that this indefinite phonic sense must be made definite, or the child will remain in a condition freighted with worry and bad spelling. It follows that a child has a right to know, and that it is our duty to teach, the standard sounds of the letters, and any additional sounds that become standard by position.)

3. Oral spelling, especially, gives and fixes phonic consciousness.

4. Writing teaches writing.

(At first, the mere mechanism of writing absorbs the whole attention. Later, a child can slowly write and follow the sequence of letters. When penmanship becomes automatic, one can write correctly any word that he can spell. We must, therefore, have much writing, not that writing teaches spelling, but that writing may not interfere with spelling.)

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INTRODUCTION.

In speaking the English language, one uses more than forty sounds. Our alphabet has but twenty-six letters. Certain letters represent more than one sound. This causes difficulties in spelling and pronunciation.

Five letters, a, e, i, o, u, are called vowels—voice letters. The word *vowel* may mean a sound; again, it may mean a character representing a sound.

The names, long, short, broad, flat, etc., as applied to sounds, being technical, are apt to mislead. In speaking a word, a long sound may be quite as short as a short sound.

The sound known as short o is difficult in two ways; difficult to know, difficult to utter when known.

Short o is allied to, and may be derived from, the sound of o in *for*, called broad o, marked ô. Ô is produced by a slow lung contraction which gives a breathed sound that may be prolonged. Short o is produced by a sudden lung contraction which gives an exploded sound that cannot be prolonged. The explosion of voice, the vocal organs being in position to utter ô, produces short o.

a. In assigning to each letter, unmarked, a sound or an influence, a feature of The Century Dictionary is used.

b. The marks used are those of Webster's International Dictionary.

c. The Standard Dictionary is followed in spelling, accent, syllabication, and pronunciation.

Each letter has a standard sound. Some letters have special sounds in certain positions. The contraction, *std.*, indicates a sound or law considered standard. The contraction, *p. std.*, indicates a positional standard; as, *c* before *e* and *i*.

Letters will be marked only when their sounds conflict with standards.

These exercises should be started as early as the beginning third grade, and finished in the fifth grade. They will bring the spelling vocabulary abreast with the pronouncing vocabulary while increasing the latter six-fold. At the end of three years' work, a child can pronounce and spell any one of 30,000 words.