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# Introduction

Amy learned to read later than most children. Even though I diligently followed at least three different reading curricula in succession (all guaranteed by my homeschooling friends) over a period of four years, Amy did not read fluently until age ten.

Spelling followed even more slowly. Amy's a thoughtful child, and thoughtful people have important things to say to the rest of us. But how can they communicate in writing if they can't spell? Sure, Amy dutifully memorized massive word lists. She memorized phonics flashcards and completed countless spelling worksheets. But when she composed a simple paragraph, Amy spelled a common word like **'went'**: **'whent'**.

When she was twelve-years-old Amy's standardized tests confirmed our deepest concerns. Her spelling scores fell below the 20th percentile! Now, you'd think I'd know what to do about the problem. After all, my master's degree was in learning disabilities and I wrote my graduate study on, (what else), "Teaching Spelling." But none of the theory I'd learned worked!

I read Ruth Beechick's comparison of spelling approaches in *You Can Teach Your Child Successfully*. Since I'd already tried the common word list and the workbook approach, I decided to try the individualized method. Dr. Beechick suggests with this method that parents teach the children words they miss in their own writing. It makes sense. Learn to spell the specific words that give you the most trouble. But for Amy,

memorizing individualized spelling lists wasn't enough. She needed something more to sink her teeth into.

Sometimes the best ideas are the simplest. I decided to take Ruth Beechick's suggestion one step further. Why not create a simple individualized spelling notebook? Put one spelling (not reading) rule on each page. Help Amy categorize her own spelling mistakes under the proper rule. Discuss the reason for each error when it arises and develop a strategy together for remembering the word's spelling. Drill Amy's own misspelled words daily for 3-5 minutes. Amy agreed to cooperate with me on this experiment. After all, she was as desperate as I was. For one whole year she and I carefully analyzed her spelling mistakes (from her own writing) and categorized them. We discovered her errors all clustered under a few rules. For example, to this day, Amy knows to listen carefully to words of three or more syllables that have a short 'e' sound. Is that a short 'e' or a short 'i' I'm hearing? (We Virginians are always mixing up our 'e' and 'i' sounds. Benefit becomes benifit, hemline becomes himline.)

The result? In one year, Amy's spelling scores rose 20 percentile points. The next year they rose another 20 percentile points. Today, (three years later), Amy's spelling is superior. If she doesn't know how to spell a word, she *notices* it and corrects the word with a dictionary. Isn't that what we're after?

Generally speaking, poor spellers have one thing in common. They don't remember how a word should look. If they did, they would self-correct when they proofread their papers. This past school year I asked

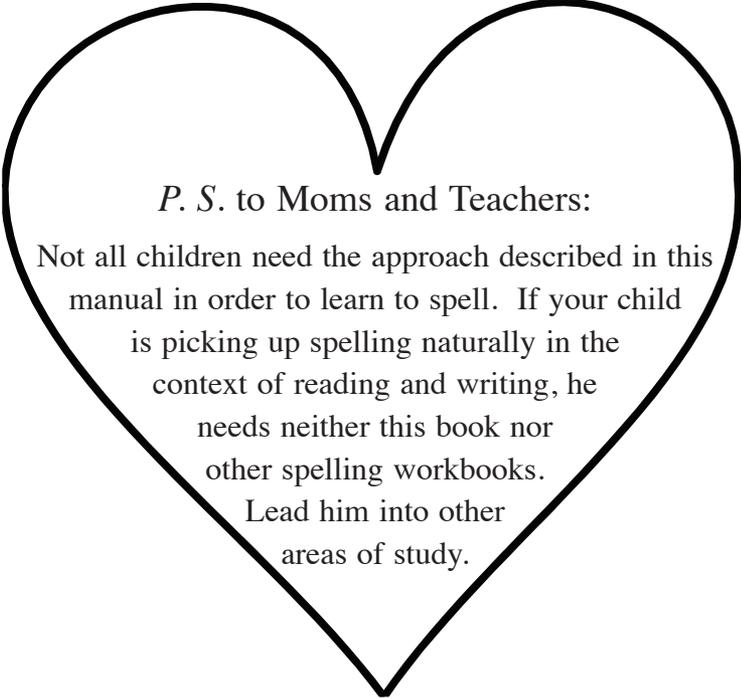
my high school humanities class (all homeschoolers) how many of them would like to solve their spelling problems? How would they like it if they could stop misspelling words in their papers? Two-thirds of the children instantly raised their hands. I warned them the approach might seem a little simple for high schoolers but I encouraged them to ask fifteen-year-old Amy if it worked.

A broad grin spread across Amy's face. "Believe me. It works!" she exclaimed.

"We'll do anything you say, Mrs. Graham, if we can learn how to spell."

I saw an immediate improvement in the spelling of the young people who used (and reviewed) their spelling notebooks. Poor spellers who overcome their problem have something in common. They pinpoint their own areas of need and then learn to pay careful attention to detail when they proofread their own writing. Since our language is so predictable, it's really not that hard to do IF we have the right tools.

This individualized spelling notebook that accompanies this manual is a tool. I believe with all my heart that anyone who uses it can overcome his or her spelling problems. Poor spellers avoid writing. I want your children to write freely without inhibition! How else will they be able to communicate their thoughts to a needy world?



*P. S.* to Moms and Teachers:

Not all children need the approach described in this manual in order to learn to spell. If your child is picking up spelling naturally in the context of reading and writing, he needs neither this book nor other spelling workbooks. Lead him into other areas of study.

# Foreword

Most letter combinations in our language are highly predictable. For example, the combination ‘**ai**’ has the long **a** sound as in **rain** 98% of the time. Two exceptions are **aisle** (where **ai** says the long **i** sound) and **said** where **ai** has the short **e** sound). Common sense tells me it is a waste of time to teach a rule for ‘**ai**’ in **aisle** or **said**. Instead, we treat these words as exceptions to be learned. Most children can handle that a lot better than “rule overload.”

Most older children have a reasonable grasp of the sounds of individual consonants and consonant blends. Therefore, I’ve not included pages in the student’s notebook, *Tricks of the Trade* for those sounds. They usually can hear and write short vowels correctly in one syllable words, but often break down in words of three or more syllables. Simply categorize the word according to the syllable that had the problem. For example, if a child spelled **compentent**, **compintent**, that word would be written on the ‘short **e**’ page in the student’s notebook.

## Chapter 1

# Spelling Myths

Let's start our discussion on teaching spelling by dispelling a few myths. Deep down inside you may have known all along these were myths, but if you're like me, you were afraid to trust your gut instincts.

The first myth is, **“Good spellers memorize lots of spelling rules.”**

Maybe you learned to spell like I did. You learned to read and you read widely. You tried to write. After lots of reading practice, you began to notice when a word you wrote “looked funny.” If a word “looked funny” you tried it another way. Why do some people spell well? Because they have good visual memories. Visual memory is the key to good spelling. So, if you happen to be a person with a strong visual memory, you remember how words look. You write a word and take a look at it. You say, “That looks funny. Let me try it a different way.” Then you change a letter or two and say, “Now that looks right.” That's exactly how a person learns to spell! Memorizing rules before you even try to spell is not the best way to learn to spell.

The second myth is **“Doing lots of spelling worksheets makes good spellers.”** Spelling is really complex thinking which occurs *as you're writing*. We can't learn to spell from workbooks alone. We learn principles about the way words are formed—the system of our language—with spelling workbooks. That's great! But a poor speller won't learn to be a good speller from

workbooks. A poor speller will learn to spell from *writing*, followed by an analysis of his own errors, followed by *drill* and more *practice*.

Writing gives your speller the chance to try out spelling patterns and words. It gives him the opportunity to think for himself, “Oh, I’ve seen it this way.” Besides the visual recollection of how the word should look, there has to be some time for reflection. What do I recall? What have I learned about how to spell the sound /**ow**/? When a child practices spelling in the context of writing, he learns to spell! He won’t learn to spell by being told, “Fill in the blanks from the list.” He’ll learn to spell from being required to use and analyze what he’s learned in the context of his own writing.

Some of you have good spellers at your house. You don’t know how they learned to spell. But they learned to read, and a year or two later they were spelling. So how did your good spellers learn to spell? They became good spellers because of their strong visual memories coupled with their ability to sequence sounds (hear syllables.)

Poor spellers don’t recall the way a word should look. Let’s give them the opportunity to think about it. Instead of spending a lot of time in workbooks, practice **free writing** followed by **categorizing the child’s own misspelled words** (according to the syllable patterns of our language) in an individualized spelling notebook. The student experiments with spelling in his own writing. Then we gently guide him in categorizing his own misspellings in a notebook. Rules are applied only as needed. Sure seems a lot easier to me!