How to spell

By John Irving

the 13 different ways the sound “sh” can be written:
- shoe
- sugar
- ocean
- issue
- nation
- schist
- pshaw

Now the good news

The good news is that 90 percent of all writing consists of 1,000 basic words. There is, also, a method to most English spelling and a great number of how-to-spell books. Remarkably, all these books propose learning the same rules! Not surprisingly, most of these books are humorless.

Just keep this in mind: If you’re familiar with the words you use, you’ll probably spell them correctly—and you shouldn’t be writing words you’re unfamiliar with anyway. Use a word—out loud, and more than once—before you try writing it, and make sure (with a new word) that you know what it means before you use it. This means you’ll have to look it up in a dictionary, where you’ll not only learn what it means, but you’ll see how it’s spelled. Choose a dictionary you enjoy browsing in, and guard it as you would a diary. You wouldn’t lend a diary, would you?

A tip on looking it up

Beside every word I look up more than once, I write a note to myself—about WHY I looked it up. I have looked up “strictly” 14 times since 1964. I prefer to spell it with a k—as in “strictly.” I have looked up “ubiquitous” a dozen times. I can’t remember what it means.

Another good way to use your dictionary. When you have to look up a word for any reason, learn—and learn to spell—a new word at the same time. It can be any useful word on the same page as the word you looked up. Put the date beside this new word and see how quickly, or in what way, you forget it. Eventually, you’ll learn it.

Almost as important as knowing what a word means (in order to spell it) is knowing how it’s pronounced. It’s government, not government. It’s February, not February. And if you know that anti- means against, you should know how to spell antidote and antibiotic and antifreeze. If you know that ante- means before, you shouldn’t have trouble spelling antechamber or antecedent.

Some rules, exceptions, and two tricks

I don’t have room to touch on all the rules here. It would take a book to do that. But I can share a few that help me most:

What about -ary or -ery? When a word has a primary accent on the first syllable and a secondary accent on the next-to-last syllable (sec’re-tar’y), it usually ends in -ary. Only six important words like this end in -ery:
cemetery
monastery
millinery
confectionery
distillery
stationery
(as in paper)

Here's another easy rule. Only four words end in -ify. Most people misspell them—with -ify, which is usually correct. Just memorize these too, and use -ify for all the rest.

stupefy
putrefy
liquefy
rarefy

As a former bad speller, I have learned a few valuable tricks. Any good how-to-spell book will teach you more than these two, but these two are my favorites. Of the 800,000 words in the English language, the most frequently misspelled is alright; just remember that alright is all wrong. You wouldn't write alwrong, would you? That's how you know you should write all right.

The other trick is for the truly worst spellers. I mean those of you who spell so badly that you can't get close enough to the right way to spell a word in order to even FIND it in the dictionary. The word you're looking for is there, of course, but you won't find it the way you're trying to spell it. What to do is look up a synonym—another word that means the same thing. Chances are good that you'll find the word you're looking for under the definition of the synonym.

Demon words and bugbears

Everyone has a few demon words—they never look right, even when they're spelled correctly. Three of my demons are medieval, ecstasy, and rhythm. I have learned to hate these words, but I have not learned to spell them; I have to look them up every time.

And everyone has a spelling rule that's a bugbear—it's either too difficult to learn or it's impossible to remember. My personal bugbear among the rules is the one governing whether you add -able or -ible. I can teach it to you, but I can't remember it myself.

You add -able to a full word: adapt, adaptable; work, workable. You add -ible to words that end in e—just remember to drop the final e: love, lovable. But if the word ends in two s's, like agree, you keep them both: agreeable.

You add -ible if the base is not a full word that can stand on its own: credible, tangible, horrible, terrible. You add -ible if the root word ends in -ns: responsible. You add -ible if the root word ends in -miss: permissible. You add -ible if the root word ends in a soft c

Poor President Jackson

You must remember that it is permissible for spelling to drive you crazy. Spelling had this effect on Andrew Jackson, who once blew his stack while trying to write a Presidential paper. "It's a damn poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word!" the President cried.

When you have trouble, think of poor Andrew Jackson and know that you're not alone.

What's really important

And remember what's really important about good writing is not good spelling. If you spell badly but write well, you should hold your head up. As the poet T.S. Eliot recommended, "Write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible"—and don't be overly concerned if you can't spell "miscellaneous." Also remember that you can spell correctly and write well and still be misunderstood. Hold your head up about that, too.

As good old G.C. Lichtenberg said, "A book is a mirror: if an ass peers into it, you can't expect an apostle to look out"—whether you spell "apostle" correctly or not.

John Irving

"This is one of the longest English words in common use. But don't let the length of a word frighten you. There's a rule for how to spell this one, and you can learn it."

(but remember to drop the final e!): force, forcible.

Got that? I don't have it, and I was introduced to that rule in prep school; with that rule, I still learn one word at a time.

Today, the printed word is more vital than ever. Now there is more need than ever for all of us to read better, write better, and communicate better.

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