

A More Effective Way To Teach Spelling

by Eileen Mattmann and Rosanne Cowan

“It’s a waste of time to teach spelling. My students memorize the list but don’t spell them correctly in their writing.” When students memorize words they have a short term goal in mind—the Friday test. Learning to spell requires more than memorizing a list of words. And yet, spelling instruction hasn’t changed much over the last hundred years. Our curriculum is too full to waste time on memorized lists. Teachers throughout the country express these same frustrations. However, we can’t afford **not** to teach spelling. Our students need to learn spelling patterns, meanings and word origins to help them in their writing and with decoding and comprehension in reading. Research tells us that when students write, they use words they feel comfortable spelling. It also tells us that even good spellers benefit from spelling instruction. So what do we teach? Word study is the answer.

How does word study differ from spelling? Word study teaches children to focus on patterns, and meaning chunks. In a word study program children learn to apply their knowledge to a greater number of words than they could learn by memorizing traditional spelling lists.

A complete word study program includes lessons that require students to focus on a pattern. For example, students discuss their observations as they compare words with endings. Some have base words that need just the added ending while others require doubling of the final consonant before a suffix is added to the word. Under the teacher’s guidance students formulate a statement about the rule or pattern. Children then analyze and practice with a large number of words that follow the pattern.

Practice includes application and word sorts. Effective word sorts require more than copying the words from a list as seen in traditional spellers. Writing the word is not as important as the physical sorting. Students need to be able to manipulate the words. By placing the sort categories in the same place each time the kinesthetic learner will remember where she placed the word when she thinks about the spelling of the word. The visual learner will remember in which column the word was placed.

Some sorts should require students to apply the rule as they sort rather than merely sort words to which the rule has already been applied. Using the doubling rule as an example, the sort separates the word and ending, such as *run + ing*. Students are required to think about the rule before placing the word in the “Double the Final Consonant” or “Don’t Double” category. When the student finally records the sort, each word is written with the suffix added. What about the student who needs a challenge? Leveled sorts on the same skill can be developed to meet the needs of the students. Using a website like Design 215

(<http://www.design215.com/toolbox/wordfind.php>) is helpful for creating lists as well as sorts of various levels. Sorts for those students needing a challenge will include words that will build

their vocabulary. These students will be using the dictionary for attaining word meaning as well as sorting words.

Word study programs integrate dictionary study in the lessons. Dictionary basics will be introduced in the primary grades through games and activities meant to excite a love of words. At the higher levels the use of the dictionary is fully integrated as students investigate meanings and connections between words. Students will learn how to read word origins through the study of word prefixes, roots, and suffixes from Greek, Latin, and other languages.

How can a word study program be tested without using a memorized list? Thinking outside the box, we give students all the parts they need to spell the word correctly. Students **apply** their knowledge of the pattern, rule, or meaning studied in the unit to complete the correct spelling.

“How can I hold students accountable for their learning? What about the misspelled words in their daily work?” One way to hold students accountable throughout the year is to include practice exercises of previously learned skills with each unit. A section of the unit test can also be designated for review. Students realize that they can’t simply say, “I don’t need to remember those words any longer,” when skills are constantly reviewed and tested.

A link between word study and correct spelling in all work across the curriculum can be established by having students maintain a word study notebook. Primary students focus on and practice high frequency words. Intermediate students and more capable primary students build a personal list from words misspelled in daily work. Watch for a future article on Spelling Notebooks and Personal Word Lists.