

# Learning to spell

Reading is a complicated business! We use the letters on the page to represent the sounds of words, then we need to understand those words. Spelling is the reverse process and needs to be learnt alongside reading. Sometimes it is useful to think of letters and spellings as the 'code' of English – we use letters or combinations of letters to represent the sounds of English.

## **Why is spelling important?**

There is a strong link between accurate spelling and accurate reading. Some students sound reasonably fluent when they are reading, but are weaker spellers. This might be a clue that they are still making a lot of effort to decode and read accurately. As a result they might not understand everything, or not enjoy reading because it is too effortful. As spelling is the reverse of reading, being good at both helps with both.

## **Why is it so hard?**

The English language has a long and interesting history, with roots in German, French and Latin. But this makes the code complicated. It is still possible to learn all of the code (44 sounds, 170+ spellings of those sounds), it just takes longer than in some other languages.

## **But why is it so hard?**

Learning how to spell accurately takes longer than learning to read because spelling is more of a burden on your memory.

We are working towards spelling being in the long term memory. An expert speller can spell words automatically and without thinking about the process. A novice (beginner) speller will still require a great deal of conscious effort to spell. We don't want to think about spelling, because we want to think about what we are writing instead.

## **Why can't I just use spell check?**

You could, but it takes time, and in the end it's better to learn them so you don't have to think about it.

## **Why can't I just use a computer?**

- 1) Because unless the exam system changes any time soon, you will be writing a lot of exams!
- 2) Because it is a very important step in learning to be an expert reader and writer
- 3) There is a lot of science that tells us that the physical action of writing helps us learn.

**Ok, so I'm convinced. But I'm rubbish at it (and I HATE it).**

- a) Spelling 'ability' is not fixed and can improve with practice. Honest, I'm still learning!
- b) Maybe you haven't been using the most effective way of learning spellings and need to try a different method.
- c) Don't give up yet!

**But what about me? I passed every spelling test in primary school, but I can't do it in my own writing.**

Don't panic! This is a perfectly normal part of the process – and is why checking for errors and preventing bad habits developing is important. We don't often go from knowing nothing to being an expert without a few steps and mistakes along the way. With the right sort of practice, you'll get there in the end.

**Does my spelling have to be perfect?**

Yes – accurate spellers are better readers.

No – we're not perfect all of the time!

There is a difference between making spelling errors from careless mistakes and because it's a word you don't know how to spell. 'Careless' mistakes should be corrected all of the time so that they don't become bad habits over time.

If there are any words you really don't know how to spell, you should make an effort to learn it. A spelling log book is useful for this.