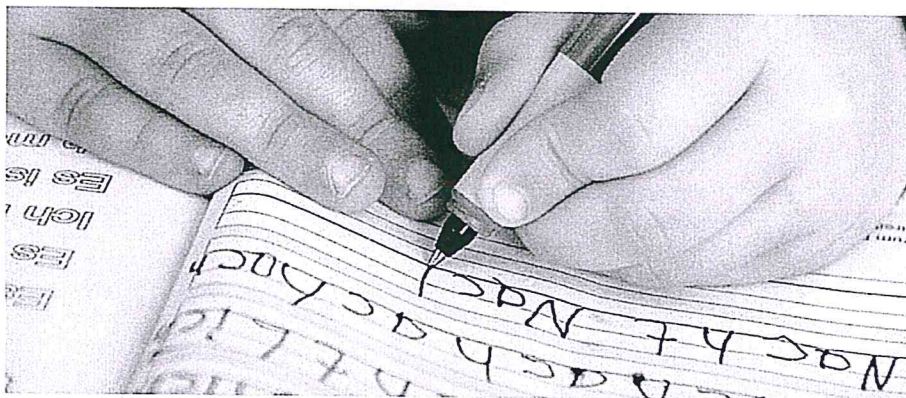


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## Cn u rd ths? A guide to invented spelling

Spelling instruction at your child's school may look different from what you remember of your school days. Here's a guide to what you might see and why things have changed.

by: GreatSchools Staff (<https://www.greatschools.org/gk/author/greatschoolsstaff/>) | March 16, 2016



Your first grader proudly shows you the story she wrote in class and it looks something like this:

"Ther ouns was two flaws. Oun was pink and the othr was prpul. Thae did not like ech athr becuse thae whr difrint culrs. Oun day thae had a fite."

### Invented spelling helps children learn

Don't panic. It is called "invented spelling" or "inventive spelling," and many teachers encourage it in the early grades. It's not because they've given up teaching children to spell, but because of a general shift in understanding about how children learn.

When children create their own spellings for words they do not know how to spell correctly they're using invented spelling. They use what they know about letters, sounds and spelling patterns to spell the word as well as they can.

Written in standard spelling, the above excerpt from a first grader's story would say: "There once was two flowers. One was pink and the other was purple. They did not like each other because they were different colors. One day they had a fight."

### Invented spelling is part of a developmental process

The writing tells you a lot about what the author has and has not learned about spelling in English. She has mastered simple consonant-vowel-consonant words like "not," "had" and "did." She knows that adding an "e" to the end of a word can make the vowel sound long, although she does not always know where to apply this rule: "thae, fite." She has mastered some irregular, but often-used words like "was," "day" and "two," but she still needs to work on "were," "they" and "there." She does not yet know how to use the common -er ending in words like "other" and "flowers," but she clearly understands that the spellings of words must reflect each sound you hear in the word: "flawrs," "difrint."

If you don't remember being praised for spelling like this when you were in school, it's no surprise. For a long time spelling was considered to be mainly a process of memorizing individual words. Today, many experts believe that spelling is a developmental process in which children acquire certain ideas or theories about spelling as they are exposed to correct, or standard, spelling. Studies analyzing many samples of young children's writing led to this shift in understanding.

Visual memory, or being able to see in your mind what a word should look like, is still recognized as an important part of spelling. However, many experts believe that visual memory is best developed by studying word patterns, and seeing and using words in reading and writing, not by memorizing unrelated lists of words. Children learn about standard spelling by reading, studying words and word patterns in school, attempting to spell words on their own, and editing their attempts.

Invented spelling allows children to communicate in writing long before they are ready to spell each word correctly. Another benefit is that children can express their ideas quickly and smoothly in a first draft, without being bogged down by trying to spell each word correctly. Invented spelling also helps children progress toward standard spelling. Sounding out words and predicting how they will be spelled reinforces students' understanding of the connection between letters and sounds, and lets them experiment with the spelling patterns they are learning. As they edit their writing and make a final draft, students get additional practice with the correct forms of words.

In an article on the Natural Child Project ([http://www.naturalchild.org/guest/margaret\\_phinney2.html](http://www.naturalchild.org/guest/margaret_phinney2.html)), reading consultant Margaret Phinney compared the process of learning to spell and write to learning to speak. She noted that parents would never forbid a child from speaking until he could pronounce each word perfectly. Instead parents encourage early speaking attempts and reinforce correct pronunciations. Phinney suggested that parents do the same with early writing — encourage children to write often and be accepting of their attempts.

## The five stages

Research studies show that children progress through five stages on their journey to correct English spelling. Remember that each child develops at her own rate and has had different experiences with reading and writing. The grade-level correspondences here are only meant to be a general guide, and your child might reach a particular stage sooner or later than indicated. If you have concerns about your child's progress with spelling, talk to her teacher. The stages as described by researcher Dr. J. Richard Gentry are:

### Stage 1: Pre-communicative

*What it means:* In this stage, children use letters and are beginning to understand that letters are the building blocks of words, but they show no understanding that letters stand for particular sounds. Pre-communicative spellers may not know all of the letters and may not write top to bottom and left to right. A child in this stage might write the letters E, A, M, B and T scattered randomly across the page to stand for "I had pizza last night."

*What you might see in the classroom:* Teachers will be helping students learn the alphabet, learn the connection between sounds and letters, understand that in English we read from top to bottom and left to right, and understand what a word is. For example, the teacher might read a story from a "big book" with the class. As the class reads, the teacher might pause to talk about particular words and the letters in them, and he might point to each word as they read it to reinforce that the words go from left to right and top to bottom.

*When you'll see it:* This stage is typically seen in the preschool years and very early in kindergarten.

### Stage 2: Semi-phonetic

*What it means:* Children begin to understand that letters stand for particular sounds. Spellers at this stage often use single letters to represent words, sounds or syllables and might use the first sound heard in the word to represent the whole word (M for "mommy" or U for "you"). A semi-phonetic speller might write "I M HP" for "I am happy."

*What you might see in the classroom:* Teachers will continue to emphasize the connections between letters and sounds, and will help children listen for all of the sounds they hear in a word. They continue to expose children to the conventions of writing, including using capital letters, writing from left to right, and the differences between words and sentences. Many teachers use a daily shared writing activity to work on these concepts. For example, the class might write a morning message as a group, with the teacher modeling and talking about when to use capitals or periods, and how to listen for and write all the sounds in a word.

*When you'll see it:* This stage is usually seen late in the preschool years and early in kindergarten.

### Stage 3: Phonetic

*What it means:* In the phonetic stage, students use a letter or group of letters to represent each sound they hear in the word. In many cases, their spelling will not be standard, but their choice of letters will make sense and you'll probably be able to figure out what it says. Many simple "consonant-vowel-consonant" words may be spelled correctly at this stage. For example, words like "rat" and "hit" are likely to be spelled correctly, but you might see "fon" for "phone," "uv" for "of," and "kak" for "cake." A phonetic speller might even write: "byutiful" for "beautiful."

*What you might see in the classroom:* At the phonetic stage, students are ready to be introduced to word families, spelling patterns, phonics and word structures. They might talk about a common spelling pattern and then look for examples of it in their reading. For example, they might talk about the word "fish," and how it has a short "i" sound and a "sh" sound at the end. Then they might watch for other examples of that pattern in their reading: wish, dish, swish.

In their reading, they will begin to be exposed to "sight words." These are words that are very common, but are not spelled quite how they sound or are spelled with an uncommon pattern. Students usually memorize these words so they can easily recognize them in their reading and use them in their writing. Many teachers put these common words on a "Word Wall" so students see them frequently and can check their spelling when they need to.



*When you'll see it:* Many students are in the phonetic stage by the end of kindergarten or the beginning of first grade.

## Stage 4: Transitional

*What it means:* In this stage, students are learning to recognize common patterns and structures in words, and they begin to use those patterns in their writing. For example, students learn that adding an "e" to the end of a word usually changes a vowel to a long vowel, and they apply that rule to many words. They might spell "mate" and "take" correctly after learning this rule, but they may also write "nite" and "wate." Students also experiment with less common patterns like "-igh." A transitional speller might write "hiked" as "highked." Many very common, but irregular words like "was" and "have" might be spelled correctly as students see and use these words frequently.

*When you'll see it:* In first grade, students are likely to move from the phonetic stage to the transitional stage, where they might stay through approximately third grade.

*What you might see in the classroom:* Students at this stage will study common and unusual word patterns. For example, they may have a lesson on different ways the long "e" sound can be spelled: "ee" as in "need," "ea" as in "meat," "e" with a silent "e" as in "here," "-y" as in "happy." They might sort a group of long "e" words by the way the sound is spelled and look for examples of the different patterns in their reading. They will probably continue memorizing the spelling of common irregular words. According to literacy specialist Karen Heath, some spelling programs for primary grade students also include movement-based practice of common words to help students get the feel of writing a particular word. For example, students might trace words in fingerpaint or sand, or they might write a word over and over on a white board.

## Stage 5: Correct

*What it means:* By this stage, students have a large number of words they know how to spell, and they will often recognize when they have spelled a word incorrectly. They understand and use basic rules and patterns from the English spelling system, including prefixes and suffixes, silent consonants, plurals, and many irregular spellings. Students in the correct stage know how to find the correct spelling of a word using reference materials. They don't spell every word correctly, but they spell most words correctly.

*When you'll see it:* Students usually enter the correct stage in late third grade or sometime in fourth grade, although their spelling continues to develop throughout their school years.

*What you might see in the classroom:* At this stage, teachers often link the spelling of words with their meaning. Students strengthen their spelling and vocabulary by studying the meaning of root words, prefixes and suffixes, especially those that come from Latin or Greek. For example, upper grade or middle school students might study the root word "sign" that evolved from the Latin "signum," meaning "mark" or "token." They might learn how the meanings and spellings of other words like "signature" and "designate" are related to sign.

Movement through the five stages is gradual and a student writing sample will often show evidence of more than one stage, although children generally do not fluctuate wildly between stages, according to Gentry.

## Questions parents have

### Why does it matter which stage of spelling my child is in?

According to Dr. Maryann Manning, a professor at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, if a teacher is aware of the developmental levels of her students' spelling, she can provide appropriate instruction and support at the student's level. For example, with a child in the earliest stages of spelling, the teacher might model how to listen for all of the sounds you hear in the word and represent those sounds on paper. With a more advanced speller, the teacher might point out how two words share the same uncommon spelling pattern (like "-igh").

Manning also recommends that teachers pay attention to the words their students are spelling almost correctly, and tailor spelling lists to the child's ability. She said, "When a student is spelling three of the four letters in a word correctly, the word is a candidate for formal memorization." She believes that a student is not ready to memorize a word until he gets close to the correct spelling on his own. Before that, the spelling patterns in the word are probably beyond his developmental level.

### Will invented spelling make my child think it is OK to spell words incorrectly?

Correct spelling in final drafts should be the goal from first grade on, according to Heath, although it is not reasonable to expect every word to be spelled correctly in the primary grades. Invented spelling is a step on the path to conventional spelling, not an end in itself. Teachers can allow students to use invented spelling and still emphasize that there are correct spellings. As their spelling ability develops, students should be expected to spell more and more words correctly, beginning with very commonly used words like "the" and "and."

Once students have mastered the spellings of the most common words and they become more proficient with spelling resources and strategies, they can use invented spelling primarily for words they have never encountered and only until they can look up or find the correct spelling. Certainly by middle school when students are using computers with spell checker, they should be accountable for very close to 100% correct spelling in final drafts of their work.

## Why is my child a bad speller?

There are two main reasons a child might be a poor speller. Some children have just not had enough exposure to reading and writing to develop spelling skills as strong as other students of the same age. These children probably also struggle with reading, and they need lots of chances to read and write. They also need spelling instruction at their developmental level, even if it is lower than their grade level.

There are also kids who are avid and competent readers but have trouble with spelling. These students probably have weak visual memories. They cannot visualize what a word should look like despite repeated exposure to it. Heath notes that requiring these students to memorize words they have trouble with is not likely to help, because they will not retain them for long beyond the test. Manning recommends that these students develop strategies to compensate for their poor spelling. For example, she suggests that students keep a personal dictionary of problem words and learn to use spell checker or some type of spelling device to help.

## What can I do to help my child with spelling at home?

Both Manning and Heath say: Read, read, read and write, write, write! Seeing and using words frequently is the best way to improve spelling. Heath recommends being a spelling resource for your child. Help him sound out words and tell him how to spell them correctly when he needs to know. She notes that as he writes the words correctly, he is learning them.

Heath also suggests that parents find out if a particular spelling curriculum is used at school and ask the teacher how you can support your child in spelling. She believes parents should find opportunities to talk about words with their children. For example, if your child uses the word "hymn," you can talk about what it means and how it is spelled. You can also point out how it is different from the word "him." It is important to get your child thinking about words and spelling.

Manning suggests that older students keep a personal dictionary of words they struggle with. It can be kept handy to use with homework assignments. She also emphasizes practicing spelling in the context of writing. She said, "You don't need a spelling boot camp every night! You want your child to do well on spelling tests, but there is little correspondence between spelling correctly on tests and being able to use words correctly in writing."

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