



Conventions

Spelling and Letter Formation

🕒 Why is this goal important?

We teach students to consider purpose and audience as they write, so it stands to reason that someday someone will be reading their work. Learning how words are spelled and spelling conventionally so that others can comprehend what has been written are important to making what we have to say clear to our readers.

When students first arrive at school, they will naturally use invented spelling, writing the best they can based on the sounds they hear in words. These early spellings are ripe opportunities for emergent writers to practice letter-sound correspondence and are an empowering way for them to get their thoughts and ideas down on the page (Routman 2005; Graves 1983; Calkins 1994; Snowball and Bolton 1999). Encouraging invented spelling is not sending the message “spelling doesn’t matter,” but rather, “you are a writer!”—even if the spelling isn’t completely correct yet, as young writers are still learning many of the confusing and contradictory rules of written English.

As beginning writers read more, see more words they can recognize in print, and generally develop more awareness of conventional spellings, they will start to realize

that some of the words they write don't look right. Because they care about what they are writing, they are motivated to work on their spelling so they can write with more accuracy on the first go and edit their pieces for spelling accuracy as well. At this point, they will start relying not only on their ear—writing the sounds they hear in the words they want to write—but also on spelling rules and remembering how words are spelled from seeing them in print (Graves 1983). As students progress through the grades, they will learn more spelling rules and patterns, and they will also memorize exceptions. Daily reading and interaction with language will expose them to and equip them with a larger vocabulary of words they can spell conventionally. This will help them feel more comfortable applying and generalizing spelling rules (spelling by analogy), and will help fine-tune their sense of “it doesn't look right” when they write a word.

How do I know if this goal is right for my student?

It's important to work from the assumption that children are doing their very best to spell the words they write, at every age and stage. Spelling errors very rarely mean that children are being careless, rather that they are learning and doing the best they can to write as they learn. When composing any piece of writing, keep in mind all of the things that a writer needs to be aware of (the focus of the piece, structure, the types of details, letting your natural voice come through, making sure the punctuation is correct, and on and on). Oftentimes, young writers' papers will be filled with invented or approximated spellings because they are not perfect spellers yet. (A claim, by the way, many adults make about themselves! Thank goodness for spell-check.)

To learn more about your students' spelling understandings, I recommend doing a spelling assessment, such as the spelling inventory that is included in *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction, Sixth Edition* (Bear et al. 2015); using the assessment as described in Don Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983, 184–94); or leaning on the work of Snowball and Bolton in *Spelling K–8: Planning and Teaching* (1999) to create your own assessment. When you know a student's spelling stage, you can tailor your word study program to support students with the specific spelling features they are working to learn—inflected endings, medial vowels, initial blends, and so on (Snowball and Bolton 1999). The strategies in this chapter are no supplement for a strong word study program, which should complement every teacher's writing program. Instead, the strategies in this chapter offer students some advice for getting words down on

the page (as best they can), proofreading their own work to find spelling errors, self-correcting errors, using resources to help them spell, as well as a few commonly used spelling rules.

Although the spelling inventory, or simply looking at student writing samples and noticing the frequency and types of spelling errors, may indicate a child who is a prime candidate for support in this area, be mindful not to introduce too-complex spelling strategies too soon. Instead, consider the developmental stage children are in as writers and teach them something that will feel like a slight nudge forward but won't shut down their creativity and ability to write fluidly. For example, teaching students to focus on spelling while they are just starting to get words on the page may cause students to be self-conscious about their approximations, drastically reduce their writing volume as they may become paralyzed with the fear of being wrong, or cause them to play it safe and only write down words they are sure they know how to spell. Also, we don't want students to spend all their time going in search of words to fix rather than focusing on making meaning. As in other chapters, I've tagged strategies according to grade levels, but as always, assessing your students' readiness for strategies is far better than just going by the grade level. Just because a child is in kindergarten doesn't mean he is ready for every strategy marked *K*, and across the kindergarten year, the student will likely benefit from different ones.

Strategies for Spelling and Forming Letters

Strategy	Grade Levels	Genres/Text Types	Processes
8.1 Long or Short Word?	Emergent–K	Any	Drafting, editing
8.2 Talk like a Turtle	Emergent–1	Any	Drafting, editing
8.3 Consult the Alphabet Chart	K–1	Any	Drafting, revising, editing
8.4 Write, Reread, Write, Reread, Repeat	K–1	Any	Drafting
8.5 When's It Big? When's It Small?	K–2	Any	Editing
8.6 Penmanship Counts!	K–2	Any	Editing
8.7 Write Word Wall Words in a Snap!	K–2	Any	Drafting, editing
8.8 Vowel Charts for the Middles of Words	K–3	Any	Drafting, editing
8.9 Spell as Best You Can—on the First Go	K–3	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting
8.10 Use Your Resources to Spell	K–8	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.11 Part-by-Part Spelling	1–3	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.12 Chin Drops	1–3	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.13 Visualize the Word and Have a Go	1–8	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.14 Use Words You Know to Spell Unknown Words	1–8	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.15 Read Your Writing Backward (and Catch Spelling Mistakes!)	2–8	Any	Editing
8.16 Circle and Spell	2–8	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.17 Making It Plural (Consonants Plus -s or -es)	2–8	Any	Generating and collecting, developing, drafting, editing
8.18 Turn to Spell-Check	3–8	Any	Editing
8.19 Check for Homophones	3–8	Any	Editing
8.20 Apostrophes for Contractions	3–8	Any	Editing
8.21 To Apostrophe or Not to Apostrophe? (Possessives)	3–8	Any	Editing
8.22 Making It Plural (While Changing the Base Word)	4–8	Any	Editing

8.13 Visualize the Word and Have a Go

Who is this for?

LEVELS
1–8

GENRE / TEXT TYPE
any

PROCESSES
generating and
collecting, developing,
drafting, editing

Strategy When trying to spell a word, try to visualize where you've seen it written and how you've seen it written before. It may help to close your eyes. Then, in a margin or on a piece of scrap paper, write how you think it's spelled. Try it a second or maybe even third way. Look back at what you've written and ask yourself, "Which of these tries looks right to me?"

Prompts

- Check off the parts that look right to you.
- Write the word as you think you've seen it before.
- Which parts look right? Which part looks off?
- Do you think there are some letters missing?
- What part of that word is tricky for you?
- The part you're trying to spell is also in the word _____. Does that help?



Hat Tip: *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating* (Routman 2000)