

# Spelling

Spelling is difficult for students with dyslexia of all ages. Spelling words is much more difficult than reading words. Unlike reading, which requires that you just recognize a word, spelling requires recall and production of the exact representation of a word.

## Regular Words

For a student with dyslexia, start spelling instruction with regular words. Regular words have predictable sound-symbol correspondences. There is no ambiguity about how to spell the word. The word is spelled just the way it sounds. With regular words, the writer (1) segments (breaks apart sounds or syllables of words) the phonemes (individual speech sounds [e.g., *cat* has three phonemes: /k/ /ă/ /t/]), (2) assigns a grapheme (the letter or letter combination that represents a single speech sound [e.g., the *l* in *lap*, the *tch* in *catch*]) for the sound, and then (3) writes the word. This is the process of orthographic mapping, which facilitates the spelling of regular words. Orthographic mapping is the process of assigning individual speech sounds to the letters that represent those sounds; this process bonds the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of a specific word in memory and explains how children learn to read sight words (regular or irregular words that a reader recognizes immediately without needing to use decoding strategies). A common procedure for introducing regular words is to show a picture of a word such as *cat* and place three boxes below the picture, one for each phoneme. The student first segments the sounds with manipulatives and then writes the letter for each sound below the tokens. A manipulative is an object such as a tile or a token that can be used to represent individual speech sounds or larger units of sounds (e.g., entire words, syllables).



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## Irregular Words

Irregular or exception words are characterized by lack of conformity to common English spelling patterns. Teachers sometimes refer to these types of words as red flag words or cheater words. Some of the more difficult exception words are *once*, *yacht*, and *colonel*. Usually, only part of an exception word is irregular. For example, the *ai* in the word *said* sounds like it should be a short *e* (/ĕ/), and the *ey* in the word *they* sounds like a long *a* (/ā/) and should be spelled with *ay*. One difficulty for many students with dyslexia is storing and retrieving accurate representations of words. Therefore, such students often spell words the way they sound, rather than the way they look.

When teaching irregular words, draw the student's attention to the irregular element, such as the *ai* in the word *said*. You can color-code the letters in red or write them in a larger font. Explain that this is the part of the word that has to be memorized. You can also draw a heart around the irregular element and say: "This is the part you have to learn by heart."

Examples:    said    s*ai*d

Some students also benefit from a multimodal procedure for mastering irregular words: (1) The student traces the word on a card while saying the word as many times as needed until they can write the word from memory. (2) When ready to write the word, the student turns over the card and writes the word from memory. (3) If the word is correct, the student then writes the word 2 more times. If it is incorrect, it is crossed out and the student goes back to the tracing procedure.

## Spelling Patterns

English also has words that have common spelling elements that are not regular but occur frequently. These elements also have to be memorized; these include patterns (e.g., *-ould*, *-ight*) and common suffixes (a word part [morpheme] that is attached to the end of a word to modify the meaning; this word part sometimes changes the part of speech of a word [e.g.,

-ing, -tion]). Students with dyslexia who have weaknesses forming accurate representations can often remember these patterns if provided with a verbal mnemonic, such as “oh (o) you (u) little (l) dog (d)” for -ould and “I (i) go (g) home (h) tonight (t)” for -ight.

## Spelling Tests

Ideally, students with dyslexia would have daily testing on a few words until they are mastered, rather than a weekly spelling test. This type of procedure requires use of a flow list, rather than a fixed list, as words are kept on the list until they are mastered. Once the student has spelled the word correctly 3 days in a row, the word goes in a word box for review a week later. If the word is spelled correctly a week later, it goes back in the box. If it is spelled incorrectly, it goes back on the short list of words for more practice. If using a flow list is not possible, provide the student with adapted weekly spelling tests. For example, the selected words could be matched to the word patterns the student is studying in their phonics lessons; the words could reinforce a rhyming or spelling pattern, such as words that are spelled with -ight; or the words could provide practice with a spelling rule, such as when you use the letters -es to form a plural (words ending in s, x, z, ch, or sh).

## Spelling Rules

Depending on the grade of the student, teach one or more of the five major spelling rules that indicate when a letter should be doubled, dropped, or changed (Carreker, 2018). These five rules work most—but not all—of the time:

1. FloSS Rule: In a one-syllable word with a short vowel and a final /f/, /l/, or /s/ sound, double the final consonant (e.g., *hill*).
2. Rabbit Rule: In a two-syllable word with one middle consonant after a short vowel, double the middle consonant (e.g., *button*).
3. Doubling Rule: When you add a suffix that begins with a vowel (e.g., -ed, -ing) to a word that has one vowel followed by one consonant in the last accented syllable, double the final consonant (e.g., *stopped*).

4. Dropping Rule: When you add a suffix that begins with a vowel to a base word that ends in -e, drop the final -e (e.g., *loved*). A base word is a word (free morpheme) that can stand alone (e.g., *like*, *sign*).
5. Changing Rule: When a base word ends in a consonant and a final y, change the y to an i before adding the suffix (e.g., *tried*).

## General Principles of Spelling Instruction

The following are general do's and don'ts for when you are helping students with dyslexia improve their spelling.

### Do

- For spelling practice, assign words that the student uses but misspells in writing.
- Ensure mastery of common, high-frequency words that the student misspells.
- Teach the student common spelling rules and practice applying these rules.
- Provide feedback on spelling errors.
- Provide praise for misspelled words that follow good spelling rules, even if the word is not spelled correctly (e.g., *rane* is a good spelling attempt for the word *rain*).
- On spelling tests, mark the number correct, not the number incorrect.
- Shorten the list or change the words if a student is missing too many words on spelling tests.
- Help the student determine an effective way to study words.

### Don't

- Penalize the student for misspelled words on any assignment that is not a spelling test.
- Use a red pen to circle all the spelling errors on an assignment.
- Assign words that are too difficult for the student to learn to spell.