

*The following material on how to support struggling spellers is extracted from Chapter 12 of Spelling: Connecting the Pieces.*

## USING FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Many struggling readers feel a sense of hopelessness when faced with the task of spelling new words. Research has shown that struggling spellers use only a narrow range of strategies for spelling and do not know how to select an appropriate strategy for specific words (Scott, 1991). Some children, for example, will try to sound out every word. This strategy is helpful for words such as *baby*, but not effective for words with silent letters (*calm*, *listen*) or schwa vowels (*dependant*, *independent*).

Struggling spellers often do not realize that there are spelling patterns and rules that can be used to spell many words. Still other struggling spellers have learning disabilities or attention deficit disorders that make it very difficult for them to focus their attention. Some of these children have developed such strength in one modality, such as visual processing, that they have difficulty with the basic skill of sounding out words.

The following activities offer some focused strategies for spelling different types of words. Struggling spellers will often show significant improvement if they are instructed in the use of these approaches. However, spelling instruction for these students (and all others, for that matter) should be carried out in short, focused sessions of 10 to 15 minutes per day, not exceeding 60 to 75 minutes per week. **Furthermore, these activities should not take the place of rich language experiences in reading, writing, and oral language.**

## What Words Should Be Studied?

Struggling spellers should study words that will be useful to them immediately in their everyday work. You can place an emphasis on words that are part of their current reading and listening vocabularies, and on those that come from their writing. Be cautious,

however, in limiting the spelling words to be studied to errors made by a student during writing, since many struggling spellers have learned to use simple vocabulary rather than taking the risk of making spelling errors. For example, a student may want to use the word *delicious* to describe a favorite dessert but substitutes *good* or *tasty* instead.

Lists of frequently misspelled words are good sources for word study (see Appendix C on page 206), especially for those words that do not fit normal spelling patterns. Specific spelling strategies can then be explored for recalling these words.

It is also important for struggling spellers to study word patterns rather than just a random list of high-utility words. The word *round*, for example, can be linked with other words in which the sound /ow/ is spelled *ou*, as in *out*, *loud*, and *house*. It also can be linked with the *-ound* word family, including *found*, *pound*, *hound*, and *mound*.

## about the authors

### Dr. Ruth McQuirter

**Scott** is an Associate Professor of Education at Brock University in St. Catharine's, Ontario, where she teaches pre-service courses in language arts and graduate courses in writing development. She has authored or co-authored over thirty books in the field of spelling, most recently *Spelling: Connecting the Pieces*.



**Sharon Siamon** has been a primary and ESL teacher. She is also an internationally acclaimed writer of novels for young people.



A well-planned published spelling program can provide effective support to struggling spellers in the systematic study of words. It is important to choose a text that is at the instructional level for the student (neither too easy nor frustrating), and that looks at both spelling patterns and spelling strategies.

### Introducing Strategies

Before introducing any of the following strategies, you could explain to students the purpose of having a range of spelling strategies. For example, visual strategies help create a clear picture of the word in the brain. You can compare the brain to a camera and explain that any spelling errors result from a “photo” of the word being slightly out-of-focus. Visual strategies help to bring the word into focus so that the picture is clear and accurate.

Similarly, word families and analogy strategies create a “filing cabinet” in the brain so that words can be retrieved more easily. Words can be stored in folders of like words instead of being a jumble on top of a messy desk. Each spelling strategy should be modelled. You can demonstrate the thinking process out loud to explain each step in the use of the strategy. Students then can practice the strategy and monitor their progress. Supports can be provided in the form of checklists of strategies, cue cards, classroom posters, learning logs, and so on. The strategies should be used in a variety of contexts, not just during formal spelling time. You will find opportunities for using them during the learning of words for other subject areas, studying for dictations, editing conferences, and impromptu times when you and the class brainstorm how to spell a tricky word.

### Determining What Strategies Will Be Most Useful

The following information presents strategies that may be particularly suitable for struggling spellers. Many of these approaches work best in a one-on-one setting and provide additional reinforcement beyond

everyday classroom spelling activities. Consider sharing these strategies with the parents/guardians of struggling spellers so they can help their children at home. These strategies can also be modelled with “writing buddies” for use during the writing process.

### 1. Visual Strategies

**Color:** Jeffrey Freed, author of *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World*, suggests that many children who are right-brained have difficulty with auditory approaches but have strengths in the visual area. Freed advocates the liberal use of color in teaching spelling, and notes that “Our left-brained schools teach spelling in black and white, usually using white chalk on blackboard” (p.97).

His experience has shown that children will pay more attention to letters on a screen if they are in color. While his advice is geared to children with attention deficit disorders, it can also apply to a broad range of struggling spellers.

The use of color can also show how words are built. Words can be broken into syllables, with each syllable presented in a different color. Longer words can also be color-coded according to base

words, prefixes, and suffixes. For younger children, word families can be highlighted by using different colors for onset and rime.

**Visualization:** Both Freed and Mary Tarasoff (1990) suggest strategies for helping children see “a picture of the word in their minds.” Freed recommends holding a paper on which the word is written at least a third of a meter away from the student. Direct the student to look at the word carefully until he or she can see it in his or her mind. Allow the student to take as much time as need to “get a picture or snapshot” of the word. Then turn the paper face down and have the student spell the word *out loud*. If the spelling is correct, move on to another word.

Freed also suggests asking specific questions about the

Visual strategies help to bring the word into focus so that the picture is clear and accurate.

targeted words after the student has gone through the visualization process; for example, “Which word has two *r*’s in the middle?” “How many *c*’s are in the word *success*?” Such questions can later become a game in which partners give clues about words on the list, and the other person must guess which word is targeted.

Tarasoff provides a variation on this visualization strategy. Using the analogy of a television screen or computer monitor, students are asked to imagine the screen, “watch” what is on it (to establish a clear picture), and then clear it off. A word is presented on the chalkboard or paper, and students are asked to “see” it on the screen and to notice the color of the letters and the background.

Both Freed and Tarasoff recommend students “read the letters” forward and backward, relying only on their visual memory. This activity is intended to help students hold the image longer. The phrase “read the letters” rather than “spell the word” stops students from automatically using their habitual spelling strategies.

**Invented Spelling and Visual Learners:** The benefits of encouraging young children to use invented spelling in their writing drafts has been well supported in research (Cramer, 2001). Children in the early grades who use invented spelling show superior spelling skills both on dictated tests and in written composition.

Freed expresses concerns, however, in supporting invented spelling beyond the initial stages of composition for children who are strongly visual in their learning style. These children, if allowed to view an unconventional spelling too often (for example, *becuz* for *because*), may have difficulty re-learning the correct spelling. He advises teachers and families to encourage these children to ask how to spell unfamiliar words before writing them. Adults should also gently point out spelling errors as they assist these children.

Freed’s advice, of course, could have the effect of minimizing risk-taking in spelling, with children learning to use only simple vocabulary that they

already know how to spell. An alternative is to teach children a core of high-frequency words that will form the basis of their spelling vocabulary, and to expect these words to be used correctly in everyday writing. These “No Excuses Words” can be displayed on Word Walls. Invented spelling could still be encouraged for unfamiliar words, with proofreading skills being taught for effective editing.

## 2. Tactile Strategies

**Hands-On Strategies:** Many word-study techniques that are normally associated with the early grades can be very effective with older students as well. Hands-on strategies are particularly helpful for students who have strengths in the bodily-kinesthetic area.

### Looking for Patterns

Many spellers have a vague idea that there are spelling rules to be learned, but they have no deep understanding of these patterns. These students are left to struggle with the linguistic jargon, without seeing any real impact on their own spelling.

Much of the difficulty students experience with spelling rules rests with the way these patterns are presented. For example, when presenting the “*I* before *E*” rule, a teacher probably said, “*I* before *E*, except after *C*, and when the word says the sound *a* as in *neighbor* and *weigh*.” The teacher then expected students to understand the concept, remember it, and apply it consistently in their writing. But what if their strengths are not in listening and auditory processing? What if they simply can’t recall the rule, or apply it automatically to new words? Consider the cognitive overload on the brain!

The following strategies should help students grasp spelling patterns in ways other than through oral presentation:

**Analogy Strategy:** The strategy of applying patterns from words we know to new words is an approach shared by skilled spellers. Analogy is a particularly useful strategy with word families. By compiling lists of rhyming words, students can see that when two words rhyme, the last part of each word is often spelled the

same. Struggling spellers benefit from knowing that they can quickly boost their spelling vocabulary with only a few letter changes.

**Word Card Sorts:** Students can be helped to grasp the “I before E” rule through the use of cards on which a variety of words are written. Some words should contain *ie* and others *ei*. Students can sort the words into piles, and then examine what rules can apply for when *i* comes before *e* and when *e* comes before *i*.

**Graphic Organizers:** Some students will be able to see patterns more clearly with the assistance of graphic organizers. These supports appeal to students who have strengths in visual/spatial awareness and logical processes. Graphic organizers can also be used as manipulatives, as in the case of hoops for Venn diagrams. As such, they appeal to the tactile senses.

*The article above is extracted from Chapter 12 of **Spelling: Connecting the Pieces**. See the column on the right for more information about ordering this title from **Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.***



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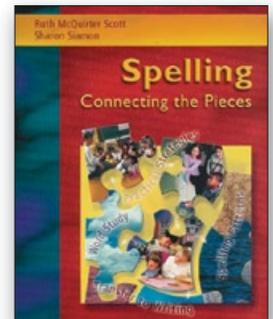
### Acknowledgements

## about the book

### Spelling: Connecting the Pieces

Ruth McQuirter Scott  
and Sharon Siamon

Canadian authors Scott and Siamon place spelling squarely and appropriately in the context of all the literacy modes. Practical advice based on research and anecdotal evidence shows educators how to implement a sound spelling curriculum. With plenty of examples from a range of writers and down-to-earth models for assessing and teaching spellers, this book is designed for the K-8 teacher intent on continually improving every student's writing and spelling achievement.



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