Taking the Guesswork out of Spelling

This article was first printed in NCTE's quarterly publication, *Voices from the Middle*. The author, Jay Richards, has graciously provided permission to VoWac Publishing Company to reprint this article in *SMANTIX!©*. Mr. Richards is an 8th grade English instructor at Central Middle School in San Carlos, California. He can be reached at richardsjay@msn.com.

Ask an eighth grader to spell "noticeable" and you'll likely see a look of uncertainty cross his face as his internal voice questions, "Do I keep the *e* or not?" Ask another to spell *blanketing* or *permitted* and you'll again notice that pause in her thinking as she wonders, "Do I double the *t* ?"

Ultimately, many students will simply guess. Some will guess correctly and some won't, though even many of those who guess right probably can't give you a good reason why: *"Robert, why did you double the t in permitting but not double the t in blanketing"? "I don't know - it just looked right. "*

When a student guesses, that guess is usually accompanied by an anxious uncertainty about the decision. Students who have to guess a lot when spelling don't believe they have control over their language; they think the language has control over them.

What most students don't realize is that there's logic behind seemingly random spellings. Evidence from the past 20 years controverts the claim that English spelling is chaotic and unprincipled (Schlagel & Schlagel, 1992). There's an understandable reason why *blanketed* has one *t* and *permitted* has two.[1] Teaching students the patterns and rules of our language helps their spelling improve.

[1.] The key to this doubling dilemma involves knowing stressed syllables. In words of two or more syllables ending with a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC), you double the final consonant before a suffix ending with a vowel when the last syllable is stressed. Hence, permit becomes permitted. If the CVC syllable before the suffix is not stressed, you typically do not double die final consonant. Hence, blanket and barrel-words in which the first syllable is stressed, not the syllable preceding the suffix, become blanketed and barreling.

Of course, those students need teachers who know the rules themselves. I've presented workshops on spelling to bright, terrific teachers who tell me afterwards, "No one ever taught me this stuff!" Being a good speller yourself doesn't really help your students unless you can explain to your students the reason why the word is spelled the way it is. A few of the "why's" to ponder:

- Why do I drop the *e* at the end of *create* to spell *creating* but keep the *e* at the end of *creative* to spell *creatively*?
- Why do I just add *s* to some words ending in *y* to make them plural (*Sundays*), though in other words ending in *y* I drop the *y* and add *-ies*?
- Why does *c* sometimes make a *k* sound and other times make an *s* sound?
- If I'm going to add *-ness* to a word that ends in *n*, do I drop the *n* already in the word?
- What's the 1-1-1 rule?
- Why is *permitted* spelled with two *t*'s while *trumpeted* is spelled with only 1?
- When should I use *-ible* and when should I use *-able*?
- Why do I drop the silent *e* in *noticing* but keep it in *noticeable*?
- Why do words like *happy*, *bossy* and *funny* have doubled consonants?

…………………………………………………………………………………

As you read, you'll discover logical answers to all of those questions. When students discover the organizational patterns behind the spelling, they learn to see that the language is more principled and less random than they thought. When they learn how our language works, students can take much of the guesswork out of spelling. It's rewarding to replace the anxious feeling of guesswork with the confident look of a student who has control over the language because he knows the reason behind the spelling.

Now, I'm not suggesting we need to spend our time teaching a rule a week. But I do think we've got to give students more information than the well-known "*i* before *e* except after *c* or when sounding like *a* as in *neighbor* and *weigh*" (which often turns students off to spelling rules because of the exceptions: *weird*, *leisure*, *species*, *either*, *neither*, *sheik*, and *seize*). Furthermore, I believe that it is difficult to help a student learn to spell "horrible" correctly if we can't tell her when to use *-ible* and when to use *-able*, or how to spell *beginning* correctly if we can't explain why the *n* is doubled before

adding the suffix *-ing*. I think it's also important to introduce rules at the right time. I lead students through a sequence of increasingly complex intuitions about the organizational patterns of words (Schlagel & Schlagel, 1992). In fact, I don't even address spelling rules until I've reviewed sound patterns; for example, in a Consonant-Vowel-Consonant word, the vowel sound will most likely be short) and stressed and unstressed syllables. If a student can't identify the stressed syllable in a word, the "when not to double rule" won't make sense. Rules work if kids are ready to understand how they work. While most usage/grammar handbooks will provide you a complete list of spelling rules, I've pared down that list to the rules my middle school students most needed.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The list of rules for all spelling sounds would take much more space than we've got in this journal. Richards's list provides a solid foundation for understanding several critical rules, in particular for adding prefixes and suffixes.]

Rules to Spell By

1. Rules for Prefixes
a) When a prefix is added to a word, do not drop a letter from either the prefix or the base word (dis- + approve = disapprove; ir-regular = irregular; mis- + spell = misspell; il- + legal = illegal).

b) The exception to the prefix rule is for *ad-*, com-, and *in-*, which can be "absorbed" by the base word so that the last letter in the prefix changes to match the beginning consonant of the base word. This is done to make the word easier to say. For example, instead of *inlegal* (meaning not legal), we write *illegal*. Instead of *adsemble* (meaning toward moving together), we write *assemble*. Instead of *conmit* (meaning to send together), we write *commit*. Other examples of words with absorbed prefixes include *allot*, *affair*, *arrange*, *acclaim*, *contest*, *colleague*, *context*, *correlate*, *irresponsible*, *immature*, *irrational*, *immortal*, *innumerable*.

2. Rules for Plurals
Nouns

a) For most nouns, add *s* (*boy/boys, table/ tables*).
b) For nouns ending in *s*, *x*, *z*, *ch*, or *sh*, add *es* (*glasses*, *foxes*,

arches, *wishes*).

 c) For nouns ending in *y* when the *y* is preceded by a vowel, add *s* (*turkeys*, *attorneys*).

 d) For nouns ending in *y* when the *y* is preceded by a consonant, change the *y* to *i* and then add *es* (*cities*, *spies*).

 e) For some nouns ending in *f* or *fe*, add *s*, others change the *f* or *fe* to *v* and add *es* (*roofs*, *beliefs*, *scarves*, *leaves*).

 f) For nouns ending in *o* when the *o* is preceded by a consonant, add *es* (*tomatoes*, *heroes*).

 g) For nouns ending in *o* when the *o* is preceded by a vowel, add *s* (*patios*, *rodeos*).

 h) For some nouns that end in *o* when the *o* is preceded by a vowel, just add an *s*. This is particularly true of words that are connected to music (*solos*, *altos*, *sopranos*).

 i) For some nouns, the plural form is a new word: *teeth*, *mice*, *oxen*.

Verbs

 a) While verbs are not plural like nouns, they take the plural form to be in agreement with the subject: He *does*; They *do*. Verbs that end in *o*, add *es*; verbs that end in a consonant, add *s* (*go-goes*; *win-wins*).

3. Rules for Suffixes

 a) If adding the suffix -*ly* or -*ness*, do not change the spelling of the base word unless the base word ends in *y* (*careful-carefully*; *usual-usually*; *fond-fondness*; *happy-happily*).

Rules for adding a suffix to words that end in silent e

 b) If adding a suffix that begins with a vowel to a word that ends in silent *e*, drop the final silent *e* (*give-giving*; *safe-safest*; *take-taking*; *admire-admirable*, *create-creative*).

 c) If adding a suffix that begins with the letter *a* or *o* to a word that

ends in *ce* or *ge*, keep the final *e* (*manage-manageable*; *notice-noticeable*; *outrage-outrageous*).[2]

d) If adding a suffix that begins with a consonant to a word that ends with silent *e*, keep the silent *e* (*measure-measurement*; *use-useful*; *creative-creatively*).

[2.] The *e* must be kept at the ends of the words to keep the *c* and *g* making their "soft" sounds of /s/ and /j/. Usually *c* makes the /k/ sound except when followed by letters *e*, *i*, and *y*. *G* usually makes the /g/ sound except when followed by *e*, *i*, and *y*.

Rules for adding a suffix to words that end in y

e) If adding a suffix to a word that ends in *y* when the *y* is preceded by a consonant, change the *y* to *i* for any suffix that does not begin with *i* (*cry-cried-crying*; *terrify-terrified-terrifying*).

f) If adding a suffix to a word that ends in *y* when the *y* is preceded by a vowel, do not change the *y* to *i* ; instead, just add the suffix (*annoy-annoyed*; *delay-delayed-delaying*; Exceptions include: *say-said*, *pay-paid*, *lay-laid*.

Rules for doubling the final consonant in a word before adding the suffix

g) If the word is a one-syllable word that has only one vowel and only one consonant after the vowel, then double the final consonant before adding a suffix that begins with a vowel (*sit-sitting*; *run running*; *pit-pitted*; *wrap-wrapper*). This is sometimes called the 1-1-1 Doubling Rule (one syllable-one vowel-one consonant after the vowel).

h) If the word has two or more syllables and the last syllable is a CVC pattern and is the accented syllable, then follow the 1-1-1 doubling rule (*permit-permitted*, *refer-referring*; *forbid-forbidden*; *occur-occurred*; *forget-forgetting*).

i) If the word has two or more syllables and the last syllable follows the CVC pattern but is unaccented, do not double the last consonant (*barrel-barreling*; *gallop-galloping*; *blanket-blanketing*; *trumpet-trumpeting*).

Rules for adding the suffixes -ible or -able

j) If the root is not a complete word (technically called a *bound*

morpheme), add *-ible* (*visible, horrible, terrible, possible, edible, eligible, incredible, permissible, invisible, illegible*).

k) If the root is a complete word without the suffix (technically called an *unbound morpheme),* then add *-able*. (*fashionable, laughable, suitable, dependable, comfortable*).

l) If the root is a complete word that ends in silent *e*, drop the silent *e* and then add *-able*. (*excuse-excusable, advise-advisable, desire-desirable,* value-valuable, debate-debatable).

m) Exceptions to *–ible / -able* rule occur when the final sound is the hard *g* or hard *c* sound, then the suffix is *-able* (*navigable, applicable*; other exceptions include *digestible, contemptible, inevitable, flexible, responsible, irritable*).

Rules for adding –ion

n) If the root ends in *ct*, add *-ion* (*select-selection*; *subtract-subtraction*).

o) If the root ends in *ss*, add *-ion* (*discuss-discussion; impress-impression*).

p) If the root ends in *te*, drop the *e* and add *-ion* (*educate-education*; *create-creation*).

q) If the root ends in *it*, change the *t* to *s* and add *–sion* (*permit-permission*; *omit-omission*).

r) If the root ends *Vde* (vowel, letter *d*, letter *e*), drop the *e*, change the *d* to *s* and add *-ion* (*explode-explosion*; *persuade-persuasion*).

s) If the root ends in *Vre, Vne,* or *Vze*, drop the *e* and add *-ation* (*declare-declaration*; *combine-combination*; *organize-organization*).

4. Other helpful rules

a) Use the word *a* before words that begin with a consonant sound; use *an* before words that begin with a vowel sound (*a car*; *an apple*; *an hour - the h is silent*; *a one dollar bill - the o makes a /w/ sound*).

b) Use an apostrophe to take the place of omitted letters in contractions (*let's, that's, don't, doesn't, it's, can't, won't, wouldn't, shouldn't, couldn't, I'm, I've, I'd, I'll, they're, they've, they'd, they'll, you're, you've, you'd, you'll, we're, we'll, we've, we'd, she'd, she'll, could've, would've, should've*).

c) Long vowel sounds will not precede a doubled consonant. Exceptions include *toll, roll, droll*, and *troll*.

d) Do not end words in the letters *v* or *z*. Add a silent *e* to words that end in those sounds (*give-not giv*; *breeze-not breez*; *have-not hav*; *love-not lov*; *snooze-not snooz*; *above-not abov*).

e) Only one English word ends in *-sede*: *supersede*. Three words end in *-ceed*: *exceed*, *proceed*, and *succeed*; all other verbs ending in the /s$\bar{e}$d/ sound are spelled with *-cede* (*intercede*, *precede*, *concede*, *intercede*).

Help students to spell homophones correctly by making sure they know the meaning of each word. Spelling the wrong word the correct way is still a spelling error. So, using *right* for *write* isn't *right*.

Reference

Schlagel R. C., & Schlagel, J. H. (1992). The integral character of spelling: Teaching strategies for multiple purposes. Language Arts, 69,418424.