

Twelve Strategies to Help You Grow Better Spellers

For Grades K–8

by J. Richard Gentry, Ph.D.



About the Author

J. Richard Gentry, Ph.D.



In addition to writing the popular books **The Science of Spelling**, **Breaking the Code**, **Spel...Is a Four-Letter Word**, **Teaching Kids to Spell**, **My Kid Can't Spell!**, and **The Literacy Map**, Dr. Gentry continues to conduct workshops that have

helped thousands of school districts throughout the United States adopt better practices for spelling instruction. A popular speaker at educational conferences nationwide, Dr. Gentry has spent much of his entire, successful career finding better ways to teach spelling.

I myself am a struggling speller. I have a personal record of 252 scores of 100 on the Friday spelling test, but I've always struggled with spelling in my own writing. I know what it's like for a child who scores 100 on the Friday test, but the following week misspells those very same words in his own writing. Spelling is complex. There are many better ways to learn spelling than memorizing a list of words.

Dr. Gentry began his career as a classroom teacher. Later, he earned his Ph.D. in Reading Education from the University of Virginia and served as professor of elementary education and reading at Western Carolina University, where he directed the reading center. As a result of his spelling research and educational experience, he has become a well-known authority on how spelling ability develops and how it contributes to a child's writing and overall literacy development.

Dear Teacher:

Research says that spelling is taught—not caught. I'm always looking for easy-to-grasp classroom strategies to share with you and "help you grow better spellers."

Here are twelve tried and true strategies you might like. I've provided the grade level, purpose, and time needed for each strategy to help you in your planning. Enjoy these strategies, and keep up the good work!

Sincerely,

J. Richard Gentry



Boost spelling skills with wall charts

While visiting classrooms across the country, I've seen excellent uses of wall charts for teaching spelling. Here are two of my favorites.



Words-for-Free

GRADE LEVELS: 1–2

PURPOSE: To encourage kids to check their spelling against a reliable source

MATERIALS: chart paper, marker

TIME NEEDED: ongoing

Words-for-Free charts nip frequently misspelled words in the bud. Choose five or six words that students often use, but spell incorrectly. First-grade and second-grade teachers usually notice culprits such as *they*, *our*, and *when*. Write the words on a chart and post it in your classroom. When kids finish a piece of writing, remind them to check the Words-for-Free chart for correct spellings.



Word Walls

GRADE LEVELS: 2–3

PURPOSE: To build spelling awareness; to help kids master frequently misspelled words

MATERIALS: a word wall

TIME NEEDED: ongoing

Word walls are the foot soldiers of building spelling skills—your first line of defense for building specific knowledge about words.

1 Call out a frequently misspelled word on the word wall. Have students say the word, chant its spelling, and then say it again. Cover the word and have students write it down, then check the spelling together. When checking the spelling, have students put a dot under each letter as they chant the spelling aloud.

2 Practice frequently misspelled word-wall words by placing them in sentences. Suppose *if*, *in*, *me*, *come*, and *let* are on the word wall. Suggest that the entire class write “Let me come in!” (Cover the word wall with stick-on notes to keep students from seeing the words.)





Teach these 5 reliable rules that every speller can use

A few spelling rules should be a part of every writer's repertoire. Here are some of the most dependable ones, along with activities for teaching them. While the complex system of English spelling is best learned through reading, writing, and focused word study, internalizing these rules is a boost to every developing speller.

GRADE LEVELS: 1–2

MATERIALS: chart paper, marker

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes, plus follow-up



The QU Rule

- 1 Write the QU Rule at the top of a chart.
- 2 Have students find and cut out *qu* words from magazines and newspapers, and paste them on the chart.
- 3 Search through samples of your students' writing for examples of correct and incorrect uses of the QU Rule. Confer with students who are having difficulty. Display their correct samples next to the chart.
- 4 Challenge students to make new *qu* words with these familiar spelling patterns: *-it*, *-ack*, *-ick*, and *-ake*.
- 5 Ask students to read and spell five short *qu* words such as *quack*, *quick*, *quiet*, *quarter*, *queen*, and *question*. They can also add their own *qu* challenge words to the list.



Q is almost always followed by U.

GRADE LEVELS: 2–3

MATERIALS: chart paper, marker, index cards, or stiff paper for making word cards

TIME NEEDED: 20 minutes, plus follow-up



The Silent E Rule

- 1 Write the Silent E Rule at the top of a chart.
- 2 Conduct a whole-class hunt for silent *e* words and list them on the chart.
- 3 Cross out all words that do not take endings, such as *came* and *are*.
- 4 Make word cards that contain one silent *e* word plus one legitimate ending.
- 5 Write the combined correctly spelled word on the back of each card.
- 6 Sort all words into two categories: "Drop the e" and "Keep the e."



When words end in silent e,

1. drop the e when adding endings that begin with a vowel.
2. keep the e when adding endings that begin with a consonant

DROP THE E

lat + er	later
love + ing	lov <u>ing</u>
give + ing	giv <u>ing</u>

KEEP THE E

late + ly	late <u>ly</u>
love + less	love <u>less</u>
give + s	giv <u>e</u> s

GRADE LEVELS: 1–2

MATERIALS: chart paper, marker, gold stars, or other types of stickers

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes, plus follow-up

STRATEGY



The Syllable Rule

- 1 Write the Syllable Rule at the top of a chart.
- 2 Search through samples of your students' writing for examples where the Syllable Rule hasn't been used. Confer with students who are having trouble, and make corrections together.
- 3 Post revised samples, with gold proofreading stars affixed near the chart.

RULE

3

Every syllable has a vowel or y.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–4

MATERIALS: chart paper, marker, index cards, or stiff paper for making word cards

TIME NEEDED: 20 minutes, plus follow-up

STRATEGY



The Changing-Y-to-I Rule

- 1 Write the Y-to-I Rule at the top of a chart.
- 2 First conduct a whole-class hunt for singular words with y endings and classify them into the two categories.
- 3 Then have each student write the plural form of a word on a card, and organize the cards into two columns.
- 4 Using the set of cards, students can practice word sorts with spelling buddies.

RULE

4

When the singular form ends with a vowel + y, add s (such as boy, boys).

When the singular form ends with a consonant + y, change the y to i and add es (such as baby, babies).

GRADE LEVELS: 4–6

MATERIALS: chart paper, marker, index cards, or stiff paper for making word cards

TIME NEEDED: 20 minutes, plus follow-up

STRATEGY



The IE or EI Rule

- 1 Write the *IE/EI* rule at the top of a chart.
- 2 Have students chant the *ie/ei* rule until they memorize it.
- 3 Do a whole-class hunt to find *ie* and *ei* words.
- 4 Prepare a wall chart with headings: *ie*, *cei*, *ei* that sounds like *a*, and exceptions.
- 5 Have students organize their words under the correct headings. Leave the chart up all year and invite students to add to it.
- 6 Throw an *ie/ei* party when everyone has learned the rule and discovered a significant number of exceptions (so far, I have found 18: *caffeine*, *fahrenheit*, *seizure*, and *protein*, among others).

RULE

5

Write *i* before *e*, except after *c*, or when it sounds like *a* as in *neighbor* and *weigh*. *Weird*, *their*, and *neither* aren't the same either.



Take stock of kids' spelling progress

Midyear is a good time to assess students' spelling development, while there's still time to help those who may be struggling. The following quick, informal assessments will help you compare your students' progress to typical midyear benchmarks. Use your findings to plan instruction for the remainder of the year.

GRADE LEVELS: K-1

PURPOSE: To determine students' grasp of constituent phonemes in words

TIME NEEDED: a few minutes per student

bat

pig

pop

STRATEGY



Are They Developing Phonemic Awareness?

When we assess very young children for spelling, we should check for phonemic awareness, a prerequisite for understanding letter-sound correspondence. It's important to remember that phonemic awareness is about sounds in words, not letters. This check will help you determine how much oral practice students need.

1 Check each student's ability to blend sounds into words. Ask students, for example, "/p/-/i/-/g/. What word is /p/-/i/-/g/?" articulating the sound of each letter, not the letter itself. Repeat the procedure with words such as *bat* and *pop*. For students who need more blending practice, choose similar words from read-aloud books.

2 Check phoneme segmentation skills. Have students say a word such as *be*. Then ask, "What are the two sounds, not letters, in *be*?" Repeat the procedure with words such as *day* and *no*.

3 Check phoneme deletion skills. Have students say a word such as *bat*. Then ask, "What is *bat* without the /b/?" Repeat the procedure with words such as *fan* and *pin*.

STRATEGY



Does Spelling Matter?

GRADE LEVELS: 2-8

PURPOSE: To assess attitudes and consciousness about spelling

MATERIALS: student work

TIME NEEDED: a few minutes per student

Review writing samples with students, using these questions as a guide.

1 Does the student proofread spelling? How?

2 Does the student avoid making sloppy spelling errors?

3 What strategies is the student using to correct misspelled words?

4 Is the student developing a caring attitude toward spelling?

5 Is the student using his or her writing as a source of "need-to-know" spelling words?

GRADE LEVELS: K–8

PURPOSE: To assess spelling growth through writing samples

MATERIALS: student work; reproducible checklist below

TIME NEEDED: a few minutes per student



Spelling Growth Checklist

Collect two representative writing samples from each student. Review them for spelling, using the checklist below. The information will give you a sense of whether students are working within grade-level parameters.

Spelling Growth Checklist

For Grades K–1

1 What do the samples demonstrate about the child’s knowledge of the alphabet?

- extensive knowledge
- some knowledge
- limited knowledge

2 Do the samples indicate growth in temporary spellings? Has the writer moved from random letters to spellings that show some letter-sound correspondences, such as bd or Bldjkj for birthday, or kt for cat? Matching some letters to sounds is a kindergarten benchmark.

- some letters correspond to sounds
- letters do not correspond to sounds

3 Has the writer moved to phonetic spelling? Phonetic spelling is a midyear, first-grade benchmark where temporary spellings are spelled like they sound and match or resemble these samples:

- meets the benchmark
- below the benchmark
- exceeds the benchmark by spelling at higher levels

WORD	PHONETIC SPELLING	WORD	PHONETIC SPELLING
bottom	botm/bodm	eagle	egl
hiked	hikt	dress	jras

4 Has the writer moved to transitional spelling? Transitional spelling is an end-of-first-grade benchmark where temporary spellings are spelled “by eye” using visual conventions that match or resemble these samples:

- meets the benchmark
- below the benchmark
- exceeds the benchmark by spelling at higher level

WORD	TRANSITIONAL SPELLING	WORD	TRANSITIONAL SPELLING
bottom	botum/bottum	eagle	egul
hiked	hicked/highked	dress	dras

For Grades 2–8

1 Is the percentage of words spelled correctly within grade-appropriate parameters? Use the following guidelines.

Second-graders spell about 60 to 70 percent of the words correctly. Third-graders spell about 70 to 90 percent of the words correctly. Fourth-, fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders spell more than 90 percent of the words correctly.

- works below grade-appropriate parameters
- works within grade-appropriate parameters
- works above grade-appropriate parameters

2 Are most of the misspelled words grade-appropriate? Use the chart below to get a rough estimate of spelling level.

IF THE MISSPELLINGS MATCH OR RESEMBLE...	ESTIMATED SPELLING LEVEL IS...
clean, find, riding	second grade
taught, circle, afternoon	third grade
afraid, steel, steal	fourth grade
applesauce, chocolate, sentence	fifth grade
opportunity, grammar, groceries	sixth grade
telegram, saxophone, telescope	seventh grade
beneficiary, equilibrium, malpractice	eighth grade

- misspellings seem to be below grade level
- misspellings seem to be at grade level
- misspellings seem to be above grade level

3 Are the words you’re covering in class—from word walls, spelling charts, and individualized spelling lists—spelled correctly in the samples?

- Yes, the student is applying class work.
- No, the student is not applying class work.



Convince parents you're serious about spelling

“My kid can't spell!” If you're like most teachers, you've probably been told that a few times. Parents often focus on spelling because it's concrete. In their children's letters to Grandma, holiday wish lists, and of course, school papers, they see spelling. When they spot errors, they may assume it's because spelling doesn't matter to you. These activities will help you prove that spelling is, in fact, a priority.

GRADE LEVELS: K-1

PURPOSE: To get to know your students individually as spellers and communicate what you learn to parents

MATERIALS: student writing

TIME NEEDED: ongoing

STRATEGY



Show Growth with Samples

- 1 Assess each student's developmental spelling level. (For guidelines, see *Teaching Kids to Spell* by Gentry and Gillet; Heinemann, 1993.) When a child moves up a level, tell his or her parents, using examples. Moving from temporary spellings such as *egl* and *laz* to *egul* and *layzee* is a big leap, so share it!
- 2 Help first graders keep “Words That I Can Spell” lists made up of words from their writing. That way you can focus parents' attention on words their children have learned.
- 3 Compose a list of high-frequency words that your students commonly misspell. Put those words on wall charts for student reference and focused study. When parents visit, explain how you use the charts to teach spelling.

STRATEGY



Glean Useful Information From Student Drafts

The following strategy will prove invaluable at parent-conference time. It will help you explain to parents what you know about their children's spelling and how you are working to improve it. Every three weeks select two pages of each students' first drafts. Review them just for spelling, with the following points in mind.

- 1 Note whether the misspelled words match the difficulty level of words on the child's weekly spelling list. For example, a fourth grader who misspells *pretty*, *does*, and *stories* in his writing shouldn't have words like *ordinal*, *conifer*, and *fibrous root* on his spelling list.
- 2 Do an overall assessment of the drafts and rank students as good, average, or poor spellers. While you don't need to broadcast your rankings, viewing students this way will help you focus on supporting average and poor spellers' development.
- 3 Determine if students are transferring weekly spelling words into their writing. Encourage students who aren't transferring words to continue working on those words by keeping them on individualized spelling lists and by using “have-a-go” strategies.
- 4 Don't accept “sloppy copy.” Talk seriously to students who are not spelling well out of laziness or poor habits, rather than out of inability. Remember, believing that spelling matters is infectious.

GRADE LEVELS: 2-8

PURPOSE: To get to know your students individually as spellers, and communicate what you learn to parents

MATERIALS: student writing

TIME NEEDED: ongoing



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