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To Spell or Not to Spell

Everyone has a different level of ability when it comes to spelling. Some of us are lucky enough to be able to spell ‘supercalifragilisticexpialidocious’ without a second thought, while others are stumped by the simplest word. For those who fall into the latter category, perhaps they weren’t taught the right sort of spelling mnemonics . . .

I before E (except after C)

This phrase is drummed into children at primary school and it works in the sentence: ‘Receive a Piece of Pie.’ But all rules invariably have exceptions, just to make life difficult:

i before *e*, except after *c*
or when sounded like *a*
as in *neighbour* and *weigh*

A similar version ends with the line: ‘as in *weigh*, *neigh* or *sleigh*’. Numerous exceptions to the rule include the words *neither*, *height*, *leisure* and *weird*.

A rhyme with an extended rule used more commonly in British schools clarifies things a little further:

When the sound is *ee*
 It's *i* before *e* except after *c*

However, even the extended rule has a number of exceptions: words such as *caffeine*, *protein* and *seize* are *e* before *i* despite having a long *ee* sound. Also, the plurals of *-cy* words end with *-cies*, which is another exception to the *i* before *e* rule, as are *science*-related words.

Hence, yet another addendum has had to be applied to the original saying:

i before *e*, except after *c*
 or when sounded like *a*
 as in *neighbour* and *weigh*
 drop this rule when *-c* sounds as *-sh*

Thus words such as *ancient*, *efficient* and *species* become covered by the additional rule.



The Vagaries of English Spelling

The English language is full of complexities and contradictions, which can make the spelling and pronunciation of certain words quite difficult to predict. Here is an anonymous poem that cleverly highlights a number of

problem words that all learners of English, young and old, should watch out for in particular.

I take it you already know
Of *tough* and *bough* and *cough* and *dough*?
Others may stumble, but not you,
On *hiccough*, *thorough*, *lough* and *through*?
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps,
To learn of less familiar traps?
Beware of *heard*, a dreadful word
That looks like *beard* and sounds like *bird*,
And *dead*: it's said like *bed*, not *bead* –
For goodness' sake, don't call it *deed*!
Watch out for *meat* and *great* and *threat*
(They rhyme with *suite* and *straight* and *debt*).
A *moth* is not a moth in *mother*,
Nor *both* in *bother*, *broth* in *brother*,
And *here* is not a match for *there*,
Nor *dear* and *fear* for *bear* and *pear*.
And then there's *dose* and *rose* and *lose* –
Just look them up – and *goose* and *choose*,
And *cork* and *work*, and *card* and *ward*,
And *font* and *front*, and *word* and *sword*,
And *do* and *go*, and *thwart* and *cart* –
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!
A dreadful language? Man alive!
I'd mastered it when I was five!

License or Licence? Practise or Practice?

A handy way to remember when to use an 's' and when to use a 'c' is illustrated perfectly in this pithy rhyme:

S is the verb and C is the noun,
That's the rule that runs the town.

The DVLA is licensed to issue driving licences.
A doctor practises medicine at his practice.



Affect or Effect?

The RAVEN mnemonic is useful when working out whether to use 'affect' or 'effect' in a sentence:

Remember: Affect, Verb; Effect, Noun

The woman was affected by the effect of the film.

Reading with care will secure everybody from
false spelling; for books are always well spelled.

PHILIP STANHOPE,
4TH EARL OF CHESTERFIELD

Spelling Aids: A Useful Selection

The spellings of some words appear to have no logic whatsoever, and the only way not to look like a dunce is to recite a well-worn mnemonic phrase to help you to remember, or even to invent one of your own.

ACCELERATOR

A **C**ruel **C**reature – imagine words and pictures to remind you to write two Cs.

ACCESSIBLE

-able or -ible?

Say out loud, **I** am always accessible.'

ACCIDENTALLY

Two Cs and an ally. Make up a story:
two cats accidentally scratched your friend and ally.

ACCOMMODATION

Again two Cs and two Ms,
and don't forget that second O after the second M.

Comfortable **C**hairs, **O**r **M**odern **M**ats, **O**r . . . ?

ADDRESS

Directly **D**elivered letters are **S**afe and **S**ound.

AEROPLANE

All **E**ngines **R**unning **O**kay.

ALMOND

ALmonds are **ovAL**s.

ARGUMENT

A Rude **G**irl **U**ndresses – **M**y **E**yes **N**eeds **T**aping.

Another way to check your spelling is to find short words within. Think of chewing **GUM** when you chew over an **arGUMent**.

ARITHMETIC

A Rat **I**n **T**he **H**ouse **M**ay **E**at **T**he **I**ce **C**ream.

ASSASSINATION

This word is made up of four short words:

ASS ASS I NATION

ASTHMA

The cause of Asthma –
Sensitivity To Household Mites.

AUTUMN

There's an N at the end of Autumn. Think of N standing for November, when it's the end of Autumn and beginning of winter.

BARE or BEAR

Imagine scenarios relating to the two words.

It's bathtime with a BAR of soap on your BARE skin.

A BEAR is scary and fills you with FEAR.

BEAUTIFUL

Big Elephants Are Usually BEAUtiful.

BECAUSE

Big Elephants Can Always Understand
Small Elephants.

Big Elephants Can't Always
Use Small Exits.