

SPELLING IN ENGLISH

Use patterns to help you spell correctly

In English, spelling and pronunciation don't always match. While there are many baffling aspects of spelling, there are a few useful patterns that can help.

TIP

- Use *i* before *e* except after *c*.
- Use silent *e* to make sounds long.
- Use double consonants to keep sounds short.
- Change *y* to *i* and add *es* and *ed*.
- Add *es* after *o* and for an extra sound.

Use *i* before *e* except after *c*

There's an old rhyme that helps us remember to write *thief* with *ie* and *ceiling* with *ei*. It goes like this:

Use *i* before *e*
Except after *c*
And in words that sound *ay*
Like *neighbour* and *weigh*.

Use <i>i</i> before <i>e</i>	believe, piece
Except after <i>c</i>	deceit, perceive
And sounds <i>ay</i>	weight, vein

Use silent *e* to make sounds long

We can think of vowels (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u*) as short (e.g. the *i* in *bit*), or long (e.g. the *i* in *bite*), depending on the time they take to say. Adding an extra vowel (e.g. silent *e*) after a consonant lengthens the sound:



Short vowels Vowel-consonant	Long vowels Vowel-consonant-e
hat	hate
pet	Pete
fin	fine
mop	mope
cut	cute

Use double consonants to keep sounds short

You might have wondered why words sometimes change their spelling when endings like *en*, *ed* and *ing* are added. We can keep a single vowel sound short when it is followed by a consonant-vowel by adding an extra consonant like this:

Short sounds Vowel-consonant	Long sounds Vowel-cc-vowel
writ	written
plan	planned
hop	hopping

This principle generally applies to stressed (emphasised) syllables rather than unstressed syllables. Hence we have two *ns* in *penned* (a single stressed syllable) but only one *n* in *opened* (where *o* receives the stress).

Change *y* to *i* and add *es* and *ed*

When we have a consonant plus *y* at the end of words (e.g. *steady*), we change the *y* to *i* and add *es* (e.g. *steadies*) and *ed* (e.g. *steadied*) to change the form of the word. This pattern doesn't apply when a vowel comes before the *y* (consider *plays* and *played*), but it generally applies otherwise. See the table overleaf:

Word	es endings	ed endings
party	parties	partied
study	studies	studied
worry	worries	worried

Add es after o and for an extra sound

There are other words that add es when they change form. Words that end in o (e.g. go) typically add es (e.g. goes). So too do words where it would be too difficult to pronounce the final s without an extra syllable. The es signals this extra sound:

Singular	Plural
finish	finishes
fix	fixes
glass	glasses

TIP

Get a spelling journal and note the spelling of five new words every day. Test yourself or get a friend to test you regularly.

Be careful with commonly confused words!

It's easy to confuse words that have different spellings and meanings, but identical or almost identical sounds. The only way to avoid confusion is to learn them by heart. Examples include:

Accept/except – If we accept (agree) that plagiarism is wrong, we will reference all ideas except (excluding) our own.

Adapt/adopt – Many students have to adopt (take on) new habits in order to adapt to (adjust to) university study.

Affect/effect – Researchers are studying how we affect (influence) the environment and the extent to which this is causing effects (results) such as climate change.

Assure/ensure/insure – The company assured (promised) them that it had ensured (made sure) the car was insured (secured against damages).

It's/its – Because the university has changed its (the ones belonging to it) courses, it's (it is) much easier to study a broad range of units.

Cite/site/sight – They cited (referred to) *Lonely Planet*, indicating that sites (places) in Australia's southwest had been recognised as the most magnificent sights (views) to see worldwide.

Their/they're/there – Although they initially lost their (pertaining to them) way, they managed to get back on track, and now they're (they are) almost there (at that place).

TIP

Fun ways to improve your spelling include playing Scrabble, Boggle and Hangman, or doing crossword puzzles.

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