

Helping your child with spelling

Developing Spelling

The older a child gets, the more potential there is for poor spelling and punctuation to hinder their academic progress. Every teacher knows numerous pupils whose written work does not do justice to the thoughts in their head, or to their verbal communication skills. At its worst, bad spelling and grammar can obscure meaning and prevent a child getting credit for their understanding.

Here's a selection of tips and ideas that may help children's understanding of the rules governing spelling and punctuation, and increase their ability to remember them when they put pen to paper.

1. Speech marks

Children are often confused about where, exactly, to put quotation marks, sometimes including the whole sentence, not just the direct quote. A link to speech bubbles in comics or books can help remind them that quotation marks are confined to the words coming out of the speaker's mouth. In the early stages, pupils can be encouraged to put a bubble round direct quotes used in writing, before using the speech marks themselves.

2. Words within words

If children can get into the habit of spotting short words within longer ones, it can help them to remember spellings, particularly when the shorter ones contribute to the whole word's meaning. Put 'another', 'something', 'whatever' and 'father' on the board, and ask who can spot shorter words hidden inside them. There are more than they, and maybe you, realise. Other ideas: ask who's got a word or words within their own names; make a list of subject-specific words with the same characteristic.

3. The link between grammar and spelling

Understanding a point of grammar can often help in spelling. How often have we seen 'helped' written as 'helpt', 'landed' as 'landid', and 'played' as 'playd'? It is how the words sound after all. But if pupils recognise the part of speech as a past participle and remember that in almost all cases, when referring to the recent past, the word will end in an 'ed', they'll make fewer mistakes. The very small set of exceptions ('spelt', 'felt', 'crept'...) can then be learned individually, after the main point has been absorbed.

4. Apostrophe

When an apostrophe is used in contractions, pupils often forget that at least one letter must go, to make way for the apostrophe. To drive this point home, try an

activity that helps kids 'see' what's happening. Line up five children at the front of the room holding the letters I, S, N, O and T in front of them, spelling 'is not'. Ask another child, with an apostrophe card, to put it in the right place, so that it makes 'isn't', emphasising that the holder of the letter O must sit down to make the new word work. Do it again with 'didn't', 'wasn't', 'can't' etc. To stretch the more able, ask them about 'won't', 'I'd', 'could've' (from 'could have', not 'could of'), and ask for examples of when a contraction is not appropriate ("I have NOT finished talking!").

5. Securing the sentence

The child that secures an early grasp of what is and what isn't a sentence is likely to write well. The idea that a full stop is needed to secure the end of a sentence can be an important stepping stone towards this understanding.

Read out a passage of writing, and ask the class to put their finger on their nose when they think there should be a full stop. This will give you a quick idea of who has a firm grasp, an imperfect understanding or no real idea at all.

Project sentences/phrases/groups of words on to the board one at a time and ask the class to do something visual (hands on head) if they think it is a sentence, and nothing if they disagree. Then ask individuals to explain their thinking.

6. Mnemonics

Mnemonics can help kids remember spellings. The key is that the child thinks up his or her own mnemonic. It's fine to demonstrate that 'many insects never use the escalator' might help with the spelling of 'minute', but the chances of long-term retention are higher when children do the creative work themselves. But use the technique sparingly, as there's a limit to how many mnemonics a child can remember!

7. Mind your own pronunciation

Attempts by teachers to stress every letter in a word, as a guide to spelling, can sometimes backfire. For example, in hearing a teacher stress the 't' at the end of 'went', some children deduce the word is spelt 'wenta', 'wenter', or 'wentu'. The answer is to say consonants with the shortest sound possible, almost as if they've been clipped. This enforces the fact that the sound is represented by just one letter.

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For more info

Also www.teachit.co.uk and www.apostrophe.org.uk

The National Association for the Teaching of English: www.nate.org.uk

and also English Answers: english.answers.com