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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL: STUDYING SPELLING SUCCESSFULLY

Kenneth Vandermeulen

Accurate spelling is obviously an important outcome of every student's elementary and high school education. It is true that some research indicates a very low correlation between spelling ability and reading or verbal background. However, it is also true that correct spelling in the world of business is emphasized, perhaps out of proportion to the rest of the graduate's educational attainments. We cannot deny that prospective employees are measured on the basis of some first impressions. His appearance, however superficial that may seem, his conversation, and his letter of application or sample of writing in his resume—these are still the basic ingredients for employment.

If the candidate's spelling is as inadequate as we have seen spelling *can* be, no matter how great his potential contribution to the company, the decision may go against him and preclude his attaining a place in which to make his contribution. In no single area of business or cultural pursuit is inaccurate spelling tolerated for long. And, since the step from newly appointed member of a business team to the executive post where misspellings may be blamed on secretaries is a long step, we believe that teaching spelling is an educational duty, and a problem we must deal with at the high school level.

English teachers know that teaching spelling is a mammoth undertaking because they are aware of the many languages which have contributed to modern American English. In no other language is there as much difficulty incurred in teaching a child to write his native language. And in no other age has accurate communication in written form become as crucially important as it has in this one.

When we look around to see what is being accomplished in schools to make accurate spelling a guaranteed outcome for all graduates, we find some dismaying evidence that the teaching of spelling is the neglected step-child of overburdened English departments, and totally ignored in most of the other academic departments. Critics of our educational systems have had a field day writing articles in popular magazines about the poor spelling demonstrated by the graduates of our nation's schools. We have all seen a host of editorials, cartoons, and whole books devoted to presenting evidence that high school graduates cannot spell. While a lot of other shortcomings may be overlooked, and the positive growth and emotional maturity *are* often overlooked, the deficiency in spelling is pounced upon as the obvious evidence.

Teachers can cite reports to show that students will learn to spell

correctly when and if they are convinced that such improvement is important to them. Teachers also know that in any given class only about one quarter of the students really need corrective spelling at basic levels. The teachers also may state justifiably that spelling study is a bore, difficult to individualize, and not at all sure of any degree of permanence.

The problem was not as acute in past generations for the simple reason that fewer students managed to stay in school through twelve grades. Nor was the problem handled with great insight by teachers of early America. When schoolmasters of the 1800's worked with the problem of spelling, they used the *spelling bee* as a means of culling the hopeless from the hopefuls. Those students who were most in need of assistance were the first out of the game. There was *no* attention to the methods of studying spelling. Those who had mastered the techniques went on to represent the school in area contests. Furthermore, the words used to test the spelling attainments of contestants were gleaned from the dictionary without consideration for or reference to their frequency of occurrence in the everyday printed uses of the language. Thus, all the worst educational practices seemed to have been gathered together and employed in the *spelling bee*; yet, that ancient institution has persisted without interruption and without much loss in reputation to this day.

Research has given us sufficient background information to improve on the methods of teaching spelling, and our single most pressing problem today is simply finding the time and opportunity for putting these good methods into practice. We know, for instance, that about 2500 to 3000 words and their derivatives constitute almost 97% of all our daily communication. We know what the most frequent spelling errors in these words are, and we know some of the factors which are causative in the errors.

Studies made on various methods of teaching spelling have helped us cull out the approaches which do not work. For instance, there are no results indicating a positive relationship between the number of times a student writes a word and his ability to spell it correctly at random times. It is a deplorable fact that knowing certain principles in the field of education does not guarantee employment of those principles; as in other places, the law of inertia seems to have operated in the field of education. Multiple studies indicate that there is little correlation between mental age and spelling ability, which leads us to the conclusion, also well documented in the literature, that student attitude and pedagogical approach are the two main reasons we have so many poor spellers in our nation and in our local schools.

The Spelling Lab

In view of the foregoing information and implications, it seems necessary for each teacher to do the following things to help eliminate poor spelling at the high school level:

- 1) bring about a recognition of the importance of accurate spelling, as it affects the future success of every student
- 2) institute a practice of having each student record the words he has difficulty in spelling correctly

- 3) set up a self-help spelling facility that will allow each class member analyze his troubles and learn a new system of studying spelling.

Selling students on the multi-sensory approach to studying spelling requires a demonstration or lecture-to-convince. As a contribution to the cause for improved spelling, the following ten-minute script can be read on a cassette tape and used as the initial tape of a spelling series. From that beginning, each student may have his own spelling study cassette made from his list of words, tailored to suit his own needs.

A Demonstration Tape

This is Cassette Number One — Spelling Study Series.

For just a few minutes, listen please to this background information before you begin the first spelling lesson. People very often refuse to think along with a person talking about spelling, because they think themselves “born” poor spellers. “Lessons won’t help me,” they say, “I’m just a poor speller, and I’ve *always been* a poor speller.” Sometimes they even excuse themselves for their poor spelling, saying, “Spelling is *all* memory work, and I have a poor memory,” or, they may even go so far as to claim that the English language is so mixed up and illogical that *no one* can be expected to learn it.

The news I bring you on this taped lesson may surprise you, but please believe it, because it’s true—you *can become an almost perfect speller*. Don’t smile in disbelief; science has learned a lot about how we acquire knowledge, and this tape may be your new running start toward perfection.

We might label these lessons “Immediate improvement guaranteed, *if* taken as directed.” Now, the only unknown quantity in this guarantee is you. *If* you pay close attention to directions, and *if* you take the trouble to check your work, and *if* you are careful as you write—then the guarantee stands.

Of course, this is not a magic formula dreamed up by the thinking computer. What this is, is a description of a method—a right way—that we will use in studying spelling. By remembering that you *can* improve, and by following directions, you may look forward confidently to much improved spelling records.

Now let’s get right down to work on the first of the three approaches. Suppose we demonstrate all three ways to remember the correct spelling of a word by taking an example which is regarded as a difficult spelling challenge—the word *chrysanthemum* stumps a lot of people. In this demonstration lesson, then, you are going to learn the method for study by which you can spell and retain the correct spelling of this word. Let’s emphasize the word *retain*; the purpose is permanence.

You should have a sheet of notebook paper for this lesson, and in the middle of the top line, write the letters of this word as I give them to you. Ready: *c h r y s a n t h e m u m*. All right? I will spell it again to make very sure you have it. Look at it with me. C-h-r-y-s-a-n-t-h-e-m-u-m.

The multi-sensory method of studying spelling capitalizes on the fact that we have more than just our eyes for studying a word. They are first, however. In the visual approach, we do more than merely look at the word.

We think about what the word *looks like*. You may see that the first part looks like *chris*, with a y, or the first part of Chrysler, or you might decide you'd compare the first part with the beginning of Christmas, with a y. The reason for seeing what each part looks like is to help your memory in associating what you are trying to learn with something you already know. It is the most effective way of learning. If you can visualize *chris* with a y, you have made the necessary connection and your memory will bring up the image of c-h-r-y-s whenever that part of the word is pronounced. All right, we have the first part.

The next part of the word is easily remembered because you can see two small words there—*ant* and *hem*. Ant is the small insect, and hem is a sewed-up folded edge of a piece of cloth. Or, if you would rather see it in a larger sense, the word *anthem* appears here, as in National Anthem. Finally, we see *u-m*, which we may hopefully believe everyone can spell. Let's review the visual step—*chris* with a y, *anthem*, and *um*.

Now the second approach, *auditory*. Many people seem to forget that when they study they have a memory for the sounds of things as well as for the look. The best method for using the auditory memory is to vocalize the letters in their order, so that you will be able to retain the order of the sounds, the inflection of the letters, and the rhythm with which you pronounce the letters. This is an individual matter, and one needs to listen to himself say the letters in their order a few times. Some people remember the *sounds* in their proper order better than by the visual approach. I'll pause while you say the letters in their order a couple of times.

The third approach is called the *muscle memory*, or kinesthetic method. In this step, you write the word, not with your pencil on paper, but merely tracing the letters in exaggerated motion with your fingers on the desk. The object here is to develop a certain muscle memory by forming the letters in their proper sequence. Maybe this sounds funny to you, but I'll bet you've known people who had to write a word out on paper before they could tell you how to spell it. This is muscle-memory, the memory of touch typing, the memory that you use when you tie shoe-strings, ride a bicycle, and so on. You can't remember how to tell someone which motions come in which order, but you could demonstrate it. Take the time right now, to trace the letters of the word chrysanthemum on your desk. Look at your source word as you think and "write" the letters.

In the last couple of minutes you have practiced the three approaches to studying a spelling word. Now let's put them together, by writing the word once in the left hand column of your paper. Say the letters quietly as you write them, and look at the word in the middle column as you write, to be sure of having the correct spelling. In doing this, you are combining the three methods of sight, sound, and muscle-memory into one. This is the reinforcement which helps to impress the correct spelling in your mind. I'll pause as you do this.

The final step in any study procedure is, of course, testing yourself, to see whether or not you managed to nail down the right spelling by your practice. To do this, you fold the left hand column of your study sheet over

the middle, so that only your right hand column is visible. I'll name the demonstration word, just as I would do in the regular study sessions, and you will write the word in the Test Column without looking at the word. Ready? Write *chrysanthemum*. (pause) Now, check your paper by opening the folded side.

At this point a very important part of spelling study should occur. If you did not have the word correctly spelled, note exactly which letters were misspelled. Analyze the error; take note of the kind of mistake, and try to learn from the mistake so that you will not be likely to make it again.

And, if you missed the word, write it correctly below the first word in the middle column, and give the process another try. Don't let yourself be discouraged – one does not always succeed on first tries. Just remember that you will gain more by a single careful rewriting of the word you miss than by the mechanical process of writing it over and over.

This is the end of lesson one in spelling study. You should go immediately to the regular series of learning to spell your words by cassette, so that you may put the principles of spelling study into practice.

The above taped cassette can be used as the initial tape of a series, which the student may use in an individual setting. Many teachers do not feel inclined to retravel the same old roads of drill in spelling when only certain people have forgotten the generalizations they were taught. For a limited cost in time and materials, the drill and the words may be preserved for replay each time the situation seems to require it. When students join a class by transfer, the taped drill may help to bring him up to date in this area. Students who have a need for familiarizing themselves with English as a second language often welcome the self-help concept in spelling practice.

While the use of spelling lists is not much better than a blanket prescription, there are a few basic lists which help teachers locate their students in relation to a norm. One such list may be found in William S. Kottmeyer's book *A Teacher's Guide for Remedial Reading*, the words being those which represent basic spelling conventions that students should know by the time they reach junior high. Another list is called "The One Hundred Words Most Frequently Misspelled by Educated People," which is always a challenge to the best students. Between the two far points on the continuum of difficulty, there are many spelling approaches, workbooks, lists, and other materials. However, the reader is cautioned to keep the spelling task fitted closely to the spelling problem of the individual. Solutions are closer when that philosophy prevails.