

ENGLISH AS A FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE

PART 7: A STRATEGY FOR SPELLING

In feedback sheets for our workshops, we are sometimes amused by comments that "grammar and spelling" were deemed least necessary. It's a reminder that what people need is not always what they want. In fact, when it comes to spelling, there seems to be widespread defiance, with people being proud of their disability.

English spelling is, of course, mind-boggling. However, there are simple ways to improve. In this last part of our series, we've put them together for you as a four-pronged strategy:

1. Be smart: use your spell check -- but *proofread* for omissions and other problems the spell check cannot catch.
2. Let your spell check teach you difficult words the painless way! All you need to do is to *pay attention* to the mistakes it highlights.
3. Learn to spell similar-sounding word pairs (e.g., *loose* vs. *lose*), which the spell check can't correct.
4. Learn the basic rules for *forming new words* with endings such as *-ed*, *-ing*, *-able*, or *-ability*

YOUR SPELL CHECK: VIRTUES AND LIMITS

Just as calculators can ruin kids' basic math skills, so the automatic spell check can strengthen people's resolve to remain poor spellers. Yet, your spell check can be your best learning tool! If you have the option to "check spelling as you type," turn it on. Seeing your mistakes underlined in red may imprint them on your mind, provided you take note. If you're really smart, you'll copy your mistakes occasionally to paper or to a computer file, with the correct spelling added.

Of course, you can't reap this benefit if you turn on "auto correction" for your trouble words, so that *embarrass* is instantly changed to *embarrass*, etc. With this feature turned on, you never see your mistakes at all, and therefore can't learn. Reserve auto correction for pure typos, such as *becuase* (*because*) or *teh* (*the*).

Now, why would you want to learn to spell difficult words (say, *precede*, *proceed*, *separate*, *category*, *tendency*, *acquainted*, *insistent*, *assistant*, etc.) if the word processor can fix them for you? If you ever use a flip chart, your reason is right there! Or do you enjoy making a fool of yourself in front of everybody?

Even if you never use a flip chart, the spell check is not your complete solution, since there are many mistakes it cannot catch. For instance, should it be *to*, or *too*, or *two*? To (too, two?) the spell check, they're (their?) all equally good words!

So, you have no choice but to learn at least those sound-alike word pairs that will slip through the spell check. Here are the most

common ones (we'll be happy to send you a more complete list if you're interested): *adapt*, *adopt*; *affect*, *effect*; *aid*, *aide*; *all ways*, *always*; *all ready*, *already*; *all together*, *altogether*; *appraise*, *apprise*; *calendar*, *calender* (*paper-making term*); *capital*, *capitol*; *choose*, *chose*; *complement*, *compliment*; *current*, *currant*; *device*, *devise*; *discreet*, *discrete*; *elicit*, *illicit*; *ensure*, *insure*; *envelop* (verb), *envelope* (noun); *forward*, *foreword*; *holy*, *wholly*; *hypercritical*, *hypocritical*; *it's*, *its*; *loose*, *lose*; *moral*, *morale*; *personal*, *personnel*; *principal*, *principle*; *quiet*, *quite*; *stationary*, *stationery*; *their*, *there*; *to*, *too*, *two*; *weather*, *whether*

The final limitation of the spell check is that it doesn't tell you how to **form new words by adding endings**. For instance, Word marks *runnability* as a possible mistake because it's not in its dictionary. Here are some rules you'll need sooner or later:

1. When you add an ending to a word, the final vowel and consonant of the original word must sound as before: short vowels must stay short, long vowels long, hard consonants hard, and soft consonants soft.
2. To keep a stressed short vowel short, double the final consonant when you add an ending that starts with a vowel, such as *-ed*, *-ing*, or *ability*: *plan* -> *planned*, *big* -> *bigger*, *occur* -> *occurring*, *run* -> *runnability*.
3. To keep hard final *c* and *g* hard, add *k* after *c* and *g* after *g*: *picnic* -> *picnicking*, *frolic* -> *frolicking*, *beg* -> *begging*, *wag* -> *wagging*.
4. To keep a soft *c* (sounding like *s*) or *g* (sounding like *j*) soft, keep the final *e* before the ending, unless the ending starts with *e*, *i*, or *y*: *notice* -> *noticeable*, *manage* -> *manageable*, *arrange* -> *arrangement*, but *manage* -> *managing*/*manager*, *sponge* -> *spongy*.

We hope these guidelines for safe English have been useful to you, and as always, we welcome your comments and questions.

Cheryl and Peter Reimold have taught communication skills to engineers, scientists, and business people for 15 years. Their firm, PERC Communications (6A Dickel Road, Scarsdale, NY 10583, telephone +1 914 725-1024), offers businesses customized in-house courses on writing, presentation skills, and on-the-job communication skills.