

## **BASIS@FAME Teaching Spelling**

Is spelling a subject important enough to study? Computers can catch our mistakes and electronic dictionaries can be purchased for 30 dollars so why bother with spelling when reading, math, science, and history are so much more interesting?

One of the primary goals of education is to learn to communicate, both in speech and in writing. Whether it's a formal report, a shopping list, or a quick note to a friend, children and adults need to write in a way that their audience can understand. Computers and electronic dictionaries are not always around, and they cannot catch many common errors. Since spelling is a component of writing, learning to spell will facilitate learning to write. Spelling is important enough to study because it's one of the four pillars of written communication.

The most traditional way to study spelling, writing the words three or more times each, is not always effective. If your student is not learning to spell easily teach her to look at difficult words with a critical eye. Ask some of the following questions: What parts of the word can be sounded out, does it follow a spelling rule, are there double letters or silent letters, is it a "foreign" word with an unusual spelling, etc? These queries form the basis of analysis and it is the parent teacher's eventual job to teach the student to do this by himself whenever he has to memorize something. Looking and thinking this way force the child's eye, ear, and brain to interact with the word. After this short (1-3 minutes) time of observation/discussion, written or oral practice is valuable. Also, before bothering to write a challenging word, many students find it helpful to look closely at it, close their eyes and then picture it in their minds. All of these techniques are mentioned in most spelling programs, but many students skip them in an effort to just get their spelling "done".

Another common problem in spelling is the child who writes without ever "proofing" his own work. Older students, beginning in third grade, should always read over what they've written before they consider it finished. When a student's mind is engaged in organizing and expressing ideas it often cannot also be focused on spelling and punctuation. Teach students to reread their work out loud so they can catch and fix simple mistakes.

There are many methods to use and types of curricula written to teach spelling. Some of the more common ones for independent study students are described below. "

- **Oral Practice:** In the early grades, particularly grades K and 1, use the phonics-based reading program to also teach spelling. Children this age cannot write much without tiring, so most, if not all of their spelling could be done orally or with manipulatives. For example, after your student has learned to spell words that end in "at" have her orally spell "cat, sat, rat, bat..." Or, use letter tiles, which you could buy or make, so she can pick out the correct letters to spell the words you name. "
- **Varied Practice:** Many kids, including kids in grades 2-6, will have success spelling words with tiles, using chalk, drawing in sand, and coloring rainbow words (write "because" in red. Then outline it in yellow, then blue, then green etc.). Other students will prosper with helpful rhymes, songs and tricks for spelling. Some children learn best when they're moving. They can practice spelling out letters for a word while they're bouncing a ball, jumping rope or walking up the stairs. "
- **Frequency Word Lists:** Some families use the frequency word lists as all or part of their spelling program, particularly in grades 1-4. Researchers have developed lists of the words most frequently used in most written materials and those words have been organized in groups of a hundred. The first hundred words are typically taught to first graders, the second hundred are taught to second graders, etc. Since they are organized by frequency not phonics, students will not be exposed to many common spelling patterns and rules if this is the only spelling program they use. These

- words are the bulk of the words used for the BASIS Junior Spelling Bee for grades K-2. Please ask your BASIS teacher for the lists if you're interested. "
- **Workbook:** Many publishers have developed a series of spelling workbooks. In the past some families have successfully used ones like Spelling Workout or Spelling Connections. Most workbooks organize spelling words by phonetic patterns such as "ar" words or "words ending in tch". In older grades they usually switch from phonetic patterns to a spelling-related study of common prefixes and suffixes and Latin and Greek roots. The first advantage of this method is that learning to spell using phonics is a helpful way to learn a lot of words. Another advantage is that they often cover other language arts subjects such as dictionary skills, vocabulary, proofreading, syllabication, and homonyms that wouldn't otherwise be covered in your daily lessons. One disadvantage is that some children do great on the spelling workbook and weekly test and then promptly forget all they learned when they do their other writing. This is because filling out the pages doesn't necessarily mean that the student actually spent time and THOUGHT about or STUDIED the difficult words. Doing does not always mean learning. : Another potential problem is that the student gives equal study time to all the words when she actually knew 14 of them and only needed to work on 6. "
  - **Spelling Power:** This curriculum begins in about 3rd grade. Students spend 15 minutes a day on spelling. Parent teacher needs to be involved daily because s/he gives a daily pretest for 5 minutes. Student spends 10 minutes studying only words he missed, using a variety of study methods. Next day, student is again tested for 5 minutes, beginning with the words missed the day before. The book includes lots of study ideas. Many students succeed with this program because of its instant correction system and its constant review. Some students hate focusing only on the things they missed. Parent/teacher must be involved with the individual student on a very regular basis. "
  - **Computer-based instruction:** There are many spelling CDs available. One CD that many families like is sold by Calvert. Beginning in 3rd grade, Calvert has a spelling and vocabulary CD program that can be used without buying the rest of the Calvert curriculum. A small booklet lists out all the words by lesson so the parent can keep up without using the computer. There is a daily pretest of 10 words. Student listens to word and types it in. After all 10 are completed student clicks a giant checkmark and the computer grades the pretest. Student is instantly shown the correct spelling and her spelling of any missed word and student must immediately type it in correctly. Then the child completes some activities/games related to each missed word. Review is built in. This program is good for a student who is a perfectionist and hates pretests with Mom. It can be done independently by the student, so long as the teacher/parent is overseeing progress. The accompanying vocabulary lessons are well done and teach many word roots and word histories. It is not suitable for a student who needs more personalized spelling instruction or who dislikes computers. There are also many other computer-based programs and games available for spelling. "
  - **Audio-based instruction:** Many learners learn best by hearing information. Also, many busy home teachers do not have time to do constant spelling instruction with all of their children. Phonetic Zoo is an audio CD-based program that some families have used successfully. Students first study the lesson's spelling rule and practice with it. Then they test themselves with an audio CD, which repeats the rule between every 5 words. After writing out the entire lesson's words students listen to the words spelled correctly and immediately correct their own work. For best results the parent should be involved in teaching the rules. Each student moves at her own pace. "
  - **Customized spelling lists:** Some students learn best by studying spelling words that come up in their own writing. For example, in a story about pumpkins, a child might misspell pumpkin, seed, vine, because and carved. Whether through a formal list or just casual discussion, those words would become the student's spelling program for a while. Some students like this method because they're very motivated to spell words they want to use. "Natural spellers," who learn to spell easily, can often pick up new words with one correction. They could keep them in a notebook, make their own personal dictionary, or just keep writing and using them as they naturally occur. There are some disadvantages to this method though. Some students, wanting to avoid extra spelling practice, begin to avoid using words they don't already know how to spell. Also, some students feel attached to their own writing and feel it is a sort of violation to derive lessons from it. Since this method is not phonics or rule based it does not necessarily teach the student how to spell the typical letter sound combinations in the English language. Finally, this method requires

the teaching parent to organize the child's own spelling program if it is going to be taught regularly. "

- **Remedial Programs:** There are spelling programs for students who've tried the usual methods and still don't spell well. Some children, who either don't hear the connection between common sounds and letter patterns, or who just can't remember all the spelling exceptions in the English language, do well with a program that either explains the rules in much more detail or presents the information in small meaningful chunks. Some programs that have been used successfully include "The Writing Road to Reading" and Sequential Spelling. Older students (4th and up) can benefit from the Megawords series, which teaches students to both read and write multi-syllable words with greater accuracy.

What if you have a student who is making steady progress in her spelling program but still misspells a lot of words in each writing assignment? Correcting every spelling error can be exhausting and demoralizing. One BASIS@FAME teacher shared an idea she used with her daughter. When her daughter was in 3rd grade she only had to correct three spelling errors in each assignment. Then, in 4th grade she fixed four errors, fifth grade five errors etc. This kept that part of learning manageable for both the parent and the child.

With spelling slow and steady may win the race. No student needs to achieve perfection, but spelling improvement will probably lead to greater fluency in writing. Students who can clearly communicate in speech and in writing are far more likely to achieve their goals than students who are inarticulate. Please discuss your child's spelling strengths and weaknesses with your BASIS@FAME teacher if you think your child needs more work in this subject and your teacher will help you decide which methods are most appropriate.

Heather Buck, BASIS@FAME IST