

Strategies for Success in UIL Spelling and Vocabulary



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First, the spelling part of the contest . . .



Why is being able to spell correctly important? As so many students say, why can't we all just depend on our computers' spell checkers to make sure we spell everything correctly?

Well, here's one answer to this question:

“Candidate for a Pullet Surprise”



I have a spelling checker.
It came with my PC.
It plane lee marks four my revue
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.

Eye ran this poem threw it,
Your sure reel glad two no.
Its vary polished inn it's weigh.
My checker tolled me sew.

(first two stanzas of Dr. Jerrold Zar's commonly cited “Spell Checker Poem”/”Ode to a Spell Checker”; see whole poem at www.bios.niu.edu/zar/poem.shtml)

The Importance of Correct Spelling



“When our spelling is perfect, it’s invisible. But when it’s flawed, it prompts strong negative associations.”

-- Marilyn vos Savant

Advice from Thomas Jefferson



“Take care that you never spell a word wrong. Always before you write a word, consider how it is spelled, and, if you do not remember, turn to a dictionary. It produces great praise to a lady to spell well.”

(in a letter to his daughter Martha)

Another observation about spelling



“Spelling counts. Spelling is not merely a tedious exercise in a fourth-grade classroom. Spelling is one of the outward and visible marks of a disciplined mind.”

-- James J. Kilpatrick,
journalist and grammarian

The Challenges of English Spelling



“If GH can stand for P as in Hiccough

If OUGH stands for O as in Dough

If PHTH stands for T as in Phthisis

IF EIGH stands for A as in Neighbor

If TTE stands for T as in Gazette

If EAU stands for O as in Plateau

The right way to spell POTATO should be

GHOUGHPTHTEIGHTTEEAU!”

(attributed to Oscar Wilde)

The Challenges of English Spelling



Then, there is this suggested spelling for “fish”: ghoti. The reasoning is as follows: “gh” can sound like “f” as in “laugh,” “o” can sound like “i” as in “women,” and “ti” provides the “sh” sound as in “action.” Popularly attributed to George Bernard Shaw, this facetious spelling suggestion, according to *The New York Times*, actually predates Shaw, going back to an 1855 letter in which the publisher Charles Ollier commented on his son’s idea for a new spelling of “fish.” (Actually, English orthography makes much more sense than this example suggests, but there’s still enough illogic to cause us problems!)

Then there's the vocabulary part of the contest . . .



Knowing how to spell words correctly is important, but it is equally or more important to know what words mean and how to use them accurately and effectively. As Mark Twain famously remarked, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

The Importance of a Good Vocabulary



Knowledge of vocabulary “is an indication of [one’s] general knowledge. Vocabulary level is the best predictor of overall success in school and performance on the SAT-verbal and other similar tests. A large and exact vocabulary is also a characteristic of successful people in many occupations.”

FROM THE JOHNSON O’CONNOR RESEARCH
FOUNDATION WEBSITE

The Importance of a Good Vocabulary



“Vocabulary is the best single indicator of intellectual ability and an accurate predictor of success at school.”
--W. B. Elley, education professor emeritus and literacy researcher

“Because each new word has to be studied and learned on its own, the larger your vocabulary becomes, the easier it will be to connect a new word with words you already know, and thus remember its meaning. So your learning speed, or pace, should increase as your vocabulary grows.” -- Johnson O'Connor, researcher

Spelling *and* vocabulary are important!



Correctly spelled words, coupled with precise and compelling diction, are two of the most important aspects of effective communication.

Some English Language History



- In the 5th and 6th centuries, the Angles and Saxons, who spoke a Germanic language, invaded present-day England.
- Old English writings began to appear in the 7th, 8th, and 9th centuries. This is the language that King Alfred referred to as “English” in the 9th century.
- Also in the 9th century, large numbers of Norse invaders arrived, adding many Norse words to the language.

Some English Language History



- In 1066, the Normans crossed the English Channel and became the masters of England, bringing French with them. Thousands of French words were added to the English vocabulary between 1100 and 1500.
- English also borrowed greatly from Latin, the language of the church.
- About 1500, the discovery of new lands brought many thousands of other new words to English. Words from India, China, Africa, and North America enriched the language tremendously.

Spelling Challenges



- New words often appeared in English with the spellings which they originally had and which did not always conform to the customs of English. Sometimes the spellings were modified to conform more closely; many times they were not.
- As a linguistic grab bag, the English language is rich, but its very richness compounds our spelling problems.

Spelling Challenges



- Present-day spelling often reflects pronunciations of several centuries ago rather than the way the word is pronounced today. Example: knight.
- During the time between Chaucer and Shakespeare, a major change in pronunciation occurred when English lost a pronounced vowel in certain positions. Chaucer pronounced “name” and “dance” as two-syllable words. By Shakespeare’s time, the “silent e” was standard in such words.

The Introduction of the Printing Press



In 1476, William Caxton introduced the printing press to England. Before this, there was little concern over such matters as spelling because reading and writing were activities carried on only by monks and other learned men. The arrival of the printing press indicated the need for some standards to be set.

Publication of Important Dictionaries



- The first English dictionary, consisting of about 2,500 words, was compiled in 1604 by school teacher Robert Cawdrey. It was called *Table Alphabeticall*.
- In 1755, Dr. Samuel Johnson published his famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, which tended to “fix” English spelling.
- In 1828, across the pond, Noah Webster published his *American Dictionary of the English Language*, and, as we all know, the two varieties of English have differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling.

The Oxford English Dictionary



The quintessential dictionary is, of course, the famous *Oxford English Dictionary*, containing over 600,000 words. In 1857, the Philological Society of London proposed a new dictionary. In 1879, work actually began on what was conceived of as a ten-year project. Five years later, they were on “ant.” This dictionary traces the development of English and includes 3 million quotations to demonstrate the history of English usage. It is an amazing piece of scholarship.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language



This dictionary, which first appeared in 1969, is the authority for the UIL Spelling and Vocabulary Contest. Containing over 200,000 entries, it is very user-friendly with clear, easy to understand diacritical marks. Teachers—and students—will find the commentary on usage interesting and enlightening. A fifth edition was published in 2011. For purposes of the Spelling and Vocabulary Contest, the third, fourth, or fifth edition of the dictionary may be used. On district, regional, and state tests, 20% of the words come from “words in current usage” that are not found in *Word Power*.

So how can students best prepare for the contest?



- Begin by assigning students a limited number of words, such as two columns (100 words) in *Word Power*. They can look up the words to determine the correct pronunciations or use commercially prepared study materials that feature written and/or oral pronunciations. Most students need some instruction in how to interpret diacritical marks. Refer to the chart in *The American Heritage Dictionary*. You may want to give students a copy of this and discuss it with them. Online dictionaries are valuable for the oral pronunciations they provide.

How to Prepare



- After sufficient individual study time (perhaps several days since most students seem to be involved in many activities!), call out the words to see how well the students have learned them. As you proceed through the list, discuss meanings and etymologies for the words marked for vocabulary study. It is useful to provide definitions for all but the most commonly known words because knowing a word's meaning helps students learn and remember a word's spelling.

How to Prepare



- Sponsors and students may come up with mnemonics to aid in vocabulary study. Students may draw a picture, make up a rhyme, or act out the meaning of a word.
- For the first few practice sessions, the sponsor should grade each student's words. In this way, he or she can determine the individual problems a student may be having and thus provide the appropriate individualized instruction. Later, students can exchange papers and grade each other's words.

How to Prepare



- Make sure that students know that there may be questions on the test that deal purely with the etymologies of the words marked for vocabulary study. Many etymologies closely parallel the denotation of a word; some are more removed from the word's present meaning. Regardless, learning the origin of a word is interesting and instructive. As Wilfred Funk writes in *Word Origins and Their Romantic Stories*, "To know the past of an individual helps us to understand him the better. To know the life history of a word makes its present meaning clearer and more nearly unforgettable."

An Example



Consider the word “vacillate.” Its etymology is *to waver*, and it comes from Latin. Its denotations are as follows: 1. To sway from one side to the other; oscillate. 2. To swing indecisively from one course of action or opinion to another.

The connection between the etymology of “vacillate” and its denotations is obvious and clear. To remember the word, one might think of a person who is trying to decide whether to attend a social gathering but who can’t make up her mind whether to go: If Val continues to **vacillate**, she will be **late** to the party.

How to Prepare



- Have fun with your students while you work. If you are bored or uninterested, you can bet that they will be, too. To be an effective Spelling sponsor, you must be excited about words. If so, you will transmit your enthusiasm to your students.
- Emphasize the team aspect and encourage teammates to support each other and to help each other learn the words.
- Expect to devote a good deal of time to preparation for this contest. It takes work to create winners.

Spelling Rules



Learning basic spelling rules is helpful. Consider the following famous rule:

I before E except after C or when sounded as A as in neighbor and weigh.

This rule holds up well for many words, but there are a number of exceptions, e.g. seize, either, neither, weird, height, foreign, leisure, conscience, counterfeit, forfeit, science, species, sufficient, efficient, ancient, caffeine.

Spelling Rules



Another helpful rule is that for –ible, -able.

If the root is **not** a complete word, add –ible. For example, visible, horrible, terrible, possible, edible.

If the root **is** a complete word, add –able. For example, fashionable, laughable, suitable, comfortable.

If the root is a complete word ending in –e, drop the final –e and add –able. For example, advisable, desirable, valuable, debatable.

Once again, however, exceptions exist: contemptible, digestible, flexible, responsible, irritable, inevitable.

What about those pesky “outside words”?



“Outside words”: the bane of sponsors and Spellers. Here’s what Section 960 of the *CCR* has to say about the sources of “outside words”:

- Words of common usage (e.g., gosling, hemorrhage);
- Words and proper names currently in the news;
- Words which by their formation or origins build vocabulary and promote the study of English. These include words with affixes, roots and suffixes which appear in words on the printed list by being different parts of speech, and other words of interest for the general lessons which they teach about language.

Suggestions for Coping with “Outside Words”



- Study roots and affixes.
- Encourage students to read widely and pay attention to words that are new to them or that they feel they could not spell if asked to do so.
- Go to the Internet (or actual books!) and find lists of SAT vocabulary or college vocabulary. For example, quizlet.com has a list titled “College Board Top 100 SAT/ACT Vocabulary Words.” Students can play games to test their spelling ability. Majortests.com also has helpful word lists. A great list of 5,000 words (!) can be found at freevocabulary.com.

The Importance of Good Penmanship



Not only must students know how to spell words correctly, but they must also write them legibly or risk having them counted wrong. In regard to legibility, the *CCR* states:

“The correct spelling of a word consists of writing legibly the letters which compose it in their proper order. Printing the word is acceptable. Legibility and not handwriting style is to be emphasized. To determine whether a given letter is legible, place a blank piece of paper on either side of it, thus separating it from its context, and then see whether the character can be identified. Any letter, even though it may not be perfectly written, is considered correct if it can still be identified when separated from the remainder of the word. If two of three judges rule that a letter is legible, it should be considered correct.”

The Importance of Good Penmanship



- Stress to students the importance of good penmanship. Look critically at students' writing. If they do not form certain letters in a standard way, show them the correct format and insist that they follow it. Caution students to avoid printing in all capital letters. Similarly, remind them that they should capitalize words **only** if a capital letter is called for.
- Explain to students the standards for determining legibility and demonstrate the process described in the *CCR*. Doing so will help make them more aware of the importance of legible writing.

Good Penmanship/Attention to Detail



Other important reminders for students:

- If a word is to be written as two words, leave enough space to make it clear that two words are intended.
- If a word has non-alphabetic components (e.g. circumflex—as in *moyen âge*, tilde—as in *mañana*, cedilla—as in *soupçon*, dieresis—as in *naïve*, umlaut—as in *Schrödinger*), such marks must be placed “clearly and unambiguously.” Accents must point in the correct direction, and apostrophes must be placed appropriately.
- Uppercase and lowercase letters that are formed in the same way or very nearly the same way must be written so that it is apparent whether they are intended to be uppercase or lowercase. The most troublesome letters tend to be *c, k, m, n, o, s, u, v, w, x, z*, and sometimes *a* if cursive or a blend of cursive and printing is used.

A Few Words from the 2013-14 *Word Power*



- **reticent**—characteristically silent in temperament. Origin: Latin, to keep silent.
- **poetaster**—an inferior poet. Origin: Latin, poet plus aster. The suffix originally comes from Greek and means “star.” It indicates inferiority or fraudulence and denotes either smallness or partial resemblance (often mildly pejorative). Compare the origin of poetaster with the common word disaster, which comes from the Italian word *disastrato*, meaning ill-starred. Mnemonic: Because his attempts at writing poetry were a disaster, he was dubbed a poetaster.

Words from 2013-14



- **roux**—a mixture of flour and butter or other fat, browned together and used as a thickening. Origin: French, meaning browned and reddish brown. Students may also learn the homophone, rue, which comes from Old English and means to make penitent. Mnemonic: She rued the day that she learned to make a good roux, for her family regularly clamored for homemade French onion soup .

Words from 2013-14



- **plagiarism**—the act of stealing and using another’s ideas or writings as one’s own. Origin: Latin, meaning kidnapper. The original noun was “plagiary,” which is now archaic.
- **chthonic**—pertaining to the gods and spirits of the underworld. Origin: Greek, meaning under the earth.
- **bonhomie**—a pleasant and affable disposition; good nature; geniality. Origin: French, a good-natured man. Bon=good; homme=man.

Words from 2013-14



- **cenacle**—a small dining room, usually on an upper floor. Origin: Latin, the Cenacle of the Last Supper. (Cēna is the Latin word for dinner.) In giving His disciples instructions for preparing for the meal, Jesus tells them in part in Mark 14.13 that a man “will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready.”
- **complaisant**—showing a desire or willingness to please; cheerfully obliging. Origin: French, to please. Be sure to have students also learn “complacent.”

Words from 2013-14



- **megalomania**—a psychopathological condition in which fantasies of wealth, power, or omnipotence predominate. “Mega” indicates “large” or “great,” while “mania” means “madness.”
- **miasma**—a poisonous atmosphere or any noxious influence. Origin: Greek, to pollute.
- **penurious**—miserly; yielding little, barren; poverty-stricken. Noun form is “penury.” Origin: Latin, meaning want or scarcity.

Vendors for Study Materials



- ASW Enterprises (www.asw.com)
- Hexco Academics (www.hexco.com)
- Panache Learning Company
(www.panachelearningcompany.webs.com)
- Tune In (for UIL A+ Academics)
(www.tuneinnet.com)

Section 960 of the *CCR*



- Sponsors should make sure they read carefully the description of the Spelling and Vocabulary Contest and know the rules. Your principal or UIL academic coordinator should have a copy. A new edition is published each year, reflecting rule changes, new dates, etc. The *CCR* is also available on the UIL's website.

The Challenges of Grading



- Grading lists of handwritten words is challenging and tiring. We all make mistakes. For this reason, each student's paper is to be graded three times. Accuracy and fairness are extremely important.
- Graders should use common sense when grading. For example, when trying to determine whether a letter is capitalized or what a letter is, try looking for other examples of the particular letter on the student's paper and compare.

Types of Graders



- **The Strict Constructionist (a.k.a. Legibility Nazi).** This grader hunts for penmanship problems and seems to delight in marking words wrong because of less than perfect handwriting, often justifying her grading criteria by saying, “Well, I would count it wrong if it were my student.” The implication is that anyone who doesn’t agree just doesn’t have the proper standards.
- **The Laissez-Faire Grader.** This grader gives the benefit of the doubt too often, sometimes out of a misguided sense of charity toward the student, or if the student doesn’t seem to be a particularly good speller anyway, the justification of “Well, it’s not really going to matter anyhow.”

Types of Graders



- **The Common Sense Grader.** This grader understands and respects the rules for determining legibility but is able to view those rules through the lens of common sense, recognizing that this is, after all, a **spelling** contest, not a handwriting competition. This grader has high standards for students but is not needlessly punitive in grading.

Please be a common sense grader!

Best Practices



What are strategies that you have used successfully to prepare students for the Spelling and Vocabulary Contest?

Spelling rules!



The best of luck to you as you prepare for UIL competition in 2013-14!

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