From Speech to Print:

Getting the Brain Ready to Read, Write, and Spell

What's on the menu? Would you like fish, bread, croissant, bagel, or swiss cheese?

Born to Speak—Taught to Read, Write, and Spell

Every baby is born with a brain that is hard-wired for oral language—that is, speaking, listening, and understanding. The human brain lacks circuitry specific to reading, writing, and spelling, however, so beginning readers and writers must repurpose neural connections that will allow them to efficiently decode (read) and encode (write and spell). In fact, accurate spelling requires the integration of three linguistic systems—phonological...
Sound Walls vs. Word Walls

One way that teachers can emphasize the speech to print progression is by creating sound walls in lieu of word walls. Unlike a word wall which is based on the first letter in a word, a sound wall can be arranged into two groups, vowels and consonants, according to the articulation of speech sounds. Sound walls help students attend to articulatory gestures, such as placement of the tongue and lips. This focus makes speech sounds more concrete since students can feel and, by using mirrors, see the position of their mouths when they speak. Liberman (1999) suggested that phonemes are represented in the brain by articulatory gestures rather than acoustic (sound) features. Sound walls also help direct students' attention to the various ways phonemes can be spelled. For example, short a is spelled one way—a (cat)—whereas long a has eight different spellings—a/silent e (rake), ai (pain), ay (say), ea (great), a (rabies), eigh (neigh), ei (rein), and ey (they). Ask your Speech and Language Pathologist for help setting up and explaining a Sound Wall.

Learning to Read and Learning to Spell are "Two Sides of a Coin"

Ehri (2000) describes the relationship between learning to read and learning to spell as "two sides of a coin." Willingham (2015) expands on that notion: "Memorizing what words look like is impractical for learning to read, but once children know how to read, they teach themselves to read via spelling." Kilpatrick (2015) states that "Students are more likely to read words they have learned to spell than spell words they have learned to read. Further, spelling of homophones side-by-side helps students develop more precision in their word-specific orthographic development (their/there/they're)."

When Should a Child be Held Accountable for Correct Spelling?

- Children should be accountable for spelling patterns that have been explicitly taught.
- For dyslexic children who may never become great spellers, direct instruction is useful so children can approximate the spelling and have better success with assistive technology.
- Spelling is a window into a child's orthographic awareness. Teachers can see what a student knows about spelling, orthography, and morphology (e.g., using "z" instead of "s" to make plurals).
Are you a spelling afficionado? Sign up for SpellTALK, a free listserv discussion group for educators dedicated to improving their students’ word study skills.

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Our Mission is to EMPOWER TEACHERS to ensure that every child learns to read by third grade.

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