

How To USE NOAH WEBSTER'S SPELLER To Teach Grammar, Spelling, Handwriting, & Vocabulary

by Laurie Bluedom (All rights of property are reserved.) This article has been taken from TEACHING THE TRIVIUM magazine. Electronic Mail Address: trivium@muscanet.com Postal Address: [Trivium Pursuit, 139 Colorado Street, Suite 168, Muscatine, Iowa 52761] Phone Address: (309) 537 – 3641

A century and more ago students might have possessed only one textbook, Webster's *Elementary Spellingbook*. Using this little book, students learned spelling, grammar, handwriting, and vocabulary. In the preface we read, "This little book is so constructed as to condense into the smallest compass a complete system of elements for teaching the language; and however small such a book may appear, it may be considered as the most important class book, not of a religious character, which the youth of our country are destined to use. "Judging from the large number of great writers produced in the nineteenth century, this book must have been adequate to teach these subjects well. With a little improvisation, Webster's Speller can be just as useful to us. Of course, if you just want to hand your child several workbooks and leave him to learn the elements of the English language on his own, then Webster's Speller is not for you. But if you do choose to use Webster's Speller, you won't need to buy separate workbooks for each grade and for every subject — grammar, spelling, handwriting and vocabulary. The little Speller can be used for all grades and all ages. There are enough words and sentences in Webster to last a long time. If your student learns to spell all the words and diagram all the sentences in Webster, let me know. I would like to meet that student. The beauty of Noah Webster's Speller is in his sentences. Here is a sampling:

"God will impart grace to the humble penitent."

"Examine the Scriptures daily and carefully, and set an example of good works."

"To revere a father is to regard him with fear mingled with respect and affection."

"Before you rise in the morning or retire at night, give thanks to God for his mercies, and implore the continuance of his protection."

"Strong drink leads to the debasement both of the mind and the body."

There are many ways you can use the *Elementary Spellingbook* to teach language arts to our child. I will list for you how our family uses the Speller. You may discover or invent other ways.

We begin using Webster's Speller in our family when the child is age ten. By this age the child is able to read, able to understand the rules of spelling, and able to grasp the grammatical concepts of subject, verb and direct object. We give each child a three-ring notebook filled with paper and subject dividers. This will be his lifelong English (language arts) notebook. The student can have separate sections for spelling rules, phonics rules, punctuation, capitalization, sentence diagramming, etc.. You will need a book which explains spelling rules and sentence diagramming. A good English handbook may be adequate. You can often find one at an old book store. [We have compiled all the spelling rules we've found in our *Handy English Encoder/Decoder*.] If you don't know your phonics rules, you will want to familiarize yourself with them as well. [These also are compiled in our *Handy English Encoder/Decoder*.] *The Elementary Spellingbook* begins with two sections entitled "Analysis of sounds in the English Language" and "Key to the Pronunciation." Webster's analysis of the sounds of the consonants is fairly easy to understand and is similar to what you have learned from such phonics programs Sam Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* or Spaulding's *Writing Road to Reading*. Though his

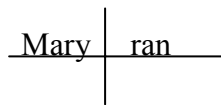
descriptions of the sounds of the vowels may not have been confusing to people in the 19th century, they will be confusing to those of us who are used to 20th Century phonics programs. Webster differentiates seven sounds for “A”, five sounds for “E”, four sounds for “I”, eight sounds for “O”, and four sounds for “U”. Twentieth century phonics programs simplify this to only two or three sounds for each and others have three sounds for “A” (fat, fate father), two sounds for “E” (wet, we), two sounds for “I” (fin, find), three sounds for “O” (tot, tote, too), and three sounds for “U” (putt, repute, put).

On pages 15-16 Webster shows the student how to form the letters of the alphabet Roman, Italic, Old English and Script. A section of the child's notebook can be labeled “Formation of Letters”,

I begin on page 20 (Lesson 12) by dictating to the child the first 10 words. The words are in word families (cab, dab, nab, etc.). We are not teaching reading (decoding) using Webster but spelling (encoding). As you dictate these words you will explain to the child why the words are spelled the way they are. The spelling rules in the back of Webster plus your English handbook will help you with this. I continue dictating 10 words a day until I have used all of Webster's one syllable, short vowel words. The child can add spelling rules to his notebook as he learns.

As the child writes these ten words from dictation you will show him the proper way to form the letters in cursive. Some children will need more instruction in this area than others, and some children will be completely familiar with handwriting from their previous phonics instruction. Communicate to the child that whatever is entered in the notebook should be written neatly. After the 10 words are dictated you can dictate a sentence to the child. At the beginning you will need to make up the sentences, as Webster does not have simple sentences with only a subject and a verb. You will be teaching English grammar using these dictated sentences, and that is where the English handbook comes in. The first sentence you dictate will be on the order of, “Mary ran.” It is at this point that you will begin to teach what a Noun is, what a Verb is, and what the Subject and Predicate are. You can also introduce some capitalization and punctuation rules here (pages 168-169 Webster). The section of the notebook on Grammar can be divided into a single page for each part of speech: Noun, Verb, etc. At the beginning, the only thing the child will have on his Noun page will be the definition: A Noun names a person, place, thing, quality or idea. (Or perhaps, A Noun is the name of anything given a name.) The child will add more about Nouns as you teach him. The same will be true with his Verb page and other parts of speech.

Now you show the child how to diagram the sentence, Mary ran:



I dictate three sentences per day, and the child will diagram all three sentences. After a few days of simile subject-verb only sentences of your own, you will begin to use Webster's more difficult sentences. Move on only after the student has mastered each concept.

Back to the spelling part of the lesson. At some point the student will be ready for long vowel words. Long vowel words begin at Lesson 17-20 and again at Lesson 33. Introduce two syllable words only when the student is ready for them. On pages 159-164 of Webster you will find the

spelling rules. At some point you will introduce these rules and dictate words from these pages (or choose your own words).

Also included in Webster on pages 139-146 are paragraphs to dictate; on pages 146-152 are words spelled alike and words pronounced alike (along with the definitions and lots of sentences); on page 165 Roman numerals; on pages 166-168 words and phrases from foreign languages and abbreviations.

Use Noah Webster's *Elementary Spellingbook* as the basic text. Supplement with an English handbook and other sources. Your child will compile his own notebook while he learns spelling, grammar, handwriting, and vocabulary. You will eliminate the need to buy a multitude of graded workbooks for each of these subjects, and for each grade level. You will be there watching and guiding your child's growth in knowledge and understanding, and perhaps learning a few things yourself along the way.

Note From Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter
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I appreciate Lauria Bluedorn for giving me permission to publish this helpful essay on how she used the 1908 edition of Noah Webster's *The Elementary Spellingbook* with her children. This is the voice of experience and not just theory speaking. I previously published on my web site www.donpotter.net a little essay by Geraldine Rodgers entitled, "WHY WEBSTER'S WAY WAS THE RIGHT WAY." Miss Rodgers explained from the historical and neurological points of view why Webster's method was so successful, not only for teaching spelling, but also for teaching beginning reading.

For several years the Bluedorn published a beautiful comb bound reproduction of the 1908 Spellingbook. Upon finding out that they were ceasing publication of the book, I secured permission from them to scan the copy I had previously purchased from them and publish it for free download on my web site. They graciously gave me permission. They have also given me permission to publish this, most helpful, essay on "How To Use Noah Webster's Speller."

I would like to recommend the Bluedorn's book, *Teaching the Trivium*, as the masterwork for teaching children with Classical Christian education model.

I especially give thanks to my Sovereign Lord who in His infinite wisdom and mercy enabled me to publish this great work for world wide dissemination on the Internet.

Donald Potter
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