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## **2. “The Road to Better Spelling” by Raymond E. Laurita**

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A Special Section on Instruction.

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If there is one aspect of English language instruction that continues to confound those in education and out, it is spelling. The fact that so many children and adults never learn to spell with anything even approaching proficiency is graphic testimony to the extent of this confusion. Fortunately, it appears there is a ray of hope on the horizon portending well for educator and layman alike. A growing body of research evidence is being produced which will enable educators to better understand exactly how to instruct children in spelling.

This research is showing differences in the processes of learning to spell and learning to read. It is now obvious that although the processes involved are closely related, they are not one and the same, and instructional techniques must be differentiated. Thus, it is possible for one to be an excellent reader but a poor speller; and conversely, but far less frequently, for one to be able to spell with greater facility and skill than he can read.

Many adults who are poor spellers are mystified since they are at the same time proficient readers. It has been my own personal experience that adults who spell poorly very often give evidence, upon closer examination, of the vestiges of reading problems, probably encountered and overcome during the early years of reading instruction.

As a general rule, however, spelling difficulty goes hand in hand with reading problems. Again, it has been my experience to find that aiding a child or adult to overcome severe reading problems is usually less difficult than solving their spelling problems, especially when treatment has been delayed.

It is apparent now that poor spelling ability is due at least in part to a failure on the part of the learner to develop a consistent method or process for use in developing an organized spelling vocabulary. It is a sad but nevertheless true fact that most laymen and many educators do not understand basic truths about how we learn to spell.

Learning to read is a very complex act still only incompletely understood. It has about it an almost mystical character which causes anyone who works closely with a young child to stand in awe at the child's ability to master this most complex learning task. Learning to spell, however, while – exceedingly complex, comes closer to being a mechanical skill, one which must be painstakingly learned like every other mechanical skill. It is tedious and frequently boring, but if a child is ever to develop an ability for written self-expression, he must learn to spell with some degree of facility. What needs to be most understood is that spelling is *not* reading, and being able to perform one act does not automatically insure success with the other.

Spelling is, then, a complex skill to be learned early and practiced throughout life. The key to success is early mastery of a spelling process or method which facilitates the development of spelling categories or memory forms during the early period of exposure to language. Once an organized method has been established, the child can begin the lifelong task of adding words to already formed categories, while at the same time developing new and ever more complex categories to add to his inventory. Thus, as each new word is examined by the child's computer brain, an act most probably occurring at the perceptual level and not involving higher level conceptual processes at the recognition stage, it can be mechanically stored away in its proper place in the brain's memory bank for instantaneous recall on demand.

For example, once the child learns a process for integrating what he sees, hears and prints, he is able to comprehend the unchanging relationship between the sound of *it*, the consistent appearance of *it*, and the graphic representation of *it*. He has thus established a spelling category for *it* into which he can place words such as *sit, pit, lit, slit, spit, split*, and eventually *befitting* and *Sanskrit*.

The child who develops this kind of mechanical skill during the early learning stages has developed a method for responding to spelling consistently and successfully. This consistent response will in time enable him not only to learn how to cope with simple spelling categories such as *it, ap, un*, etc., but also increasingly complex spelling forms such as *ide, ack, ing, ight, tion, ture*, etc.

Chomsky, writing in the *Harvard Review*, states: "Many spelling errors could be avoided if the writer developed the habit of looking for regularities that underlie related words when in doubt. This is part of the strategy used by good spellers as a matter of course. For the child who spells poorly it is far more productive to learn how to look for these regularities than simply to memorize the spellings of words as isolated examples. Providing him with a strategy based on the realities of the language is clearly the best way to equip him to deal with new examples on his own."

With this in mind, there are a few steps that can be followed in assisting children either in learning to spell initially or in improving their ability to spell if they are already experiencing difficulty.

**1. Don't concentrate on quantity, but focus attention instead on the quality of the child's spelling.** If, for instance, a child in the second grade is already exhibiting signs of difficulty in remembering how to spell an assigned list of words, attention should be directed toward aiding him in the development of a consistent learning method rather than toward futile efforts at remembering an entire list of words.

For example, if the first word on the list should be *park*, don't lose sight of the real value that the learning of even one such word can have, especially at the lowest levels. Place the word *park* on the top of a sheet of paper and underline the last three letters – *park*. Underneath write as many words ending in the element *ark* as possible to show the child the consistent relationship between the appearance, sound, and graphic representation of this very consistent linguistic element – *mark, bark, lark, dark, hark, spark, stark, shark*, etc. In the case of extreme disability, far more benefit would accrue if such a course were followed and only this one word were assigned for memorization, rather than the indefensible practice of insisting that poor spellers attempt to commit to memory as many as 20 such words per spelling lesson.

If the disability is of lesser degree, the same process should be followed, using as many words as the child can comfortably handle. This type of procedure should be consistently followed until such time as the child demonstrates empirically that he understands essential spelling relationships. Such relationships appear self-apparent to the average adult, but are among the most complex perceptual learning acts the child will ever be asked to master. Most teachers will be surprised to observe how many children do not really understand these relationships. And even if the children do understand the relationships, they frequently fail to carry their understandings over to the spelling act through lack of persistent instruction and practical experiences.

2. Once the teacher stops concentrating on quantity and thinks more in terms of processes used by the child in spelling, he becomes better prepared to understand the need for the integration of all available senses the child uses in the spelling act. Most of the great names in the field of remedial instruction, such as Fernald, Gillingham, Johnson, and even Montessori, realized the need for such integration. I have developed a method which is a distillation of what some of these pioneers taught and which I have found useful for all children, with and without spelling deficiencies.

- a. Place the word to be spelled clearly on a piece of paper.
- b. Have the child look at the word, pronounce it, spell it aloud while looking or pointing at each letter and finally, pronounce it again.
- c. Next, have the child look at the word again, pronounce it, and then print it on the paper directly under the original word while saying each letter aloud, with a final pronunciation of the word after completing the spelling.
- d. As a test of proficiency, cover the word and try to have the child print the word again from memory using his voice as a memory stimulus if so desired. (With children suffering from extreme disability, this process may have to be limited to a single word at a time in the development of the essential sensory integration needed for the development of a spelling vocabulary.)
- e. As an added step, which I find invaluable, ask the child to write a short sentence from dictation in which he must recall the learned word in meaningful context. The sentence should be simple at first and composed of words which the child has already incorporated into his spelling vocabulary. For example, if the word to be learned were *park*, the sentence could be, "He is in the park," or "I can park the car." In short, the only word the child should have to recall for spelling purposes is *park*.

3. This method for learning to spell is one that can be recommended for any child or group of children for use until spelling skills are well developed or, more precisely, until a spelling process has been established and is being used automatically. The use of such an approach can be a useful experience for a number of reasons. First, it may provide many teachers with an enlightening experience in developing an awareness of the complexity of our language system. Second, it may give the teacher the opportunity of providing the child with meaningful assistance in mastering this most difficult skill. And, third and last, the teacher may become aware of a difficulty a child may be suffering, even a child who appears to be an excellent reader, but who has escaped detection in a busy classroom filled with children whose problems are more obvious and demanding of attention.

## **Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter**

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Spelling is a fascinating subject for many reasons. Personally, I had a rather difficult time learning to spell well. Perhaps it was my struggle that helped me be a good spelling teacher during my 30 years teaching spelling to elementary students in public and private classrooms.

J. Richard Gentry is probably the leading spelling authority in America today. He takes a similar position to Laurita in his understanding of the value of spelling instruction in helping students become fluent readers.

Here is Gentry's essay, "Lousy Spelling – Why Americans Can't Read or Think Well.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/raising-readers-writers-and-spellers/201707/lousy-spelling-why-americans-can-t-read-or-think>

Wading through Roland P. Carver's *The Causes of High and Low Reading Achievement* (2000) in 2010 was a real wakeup call concerning the importance of spelling instruction as a factor in helping children achieve what Carver called high level Rauding Rates, which is the rate of reading that is equal the students rate of listening with comprehension. I use the term "wading" because reading through Carver's daunting book is an achievement in itself!

Here are my personal notes on Carver's book.

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/carver\\_quotes.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/carver_quotes.pdf)

Accessed on February 5, 2020

[http://spellingsociety.org/uploaded\\_bulletins/spb71-2-bulletin.pdf](http://spellingsociety.org/uploaded_bulletins/spb71-2-bulletin.pdf)