

# Why English Spelling should be updated

- A quarter of English-speaking children cannot read properly by age 11
- Around 7 million adults in the UK and 40 million in the US are functionally illiterate
- Nearly half of all English speakers have spelling problems

Nearly all Italian children learn to read in couple of months  
and can write well after just 2 years at school

Learning to read English is difficult because it has too many contradictory spellings

go - <u>do</u>	here - there - <u>were</u>	came - <u>camera</u>	<u>callous</u> - <u>calling</u>
<u>home</u> - <u>come</u>	<u>hero</u> - <u>heron</u>	<u>cater</u> - <u>caterpillar</u>	<u>clamber</u> - <u>chamber</u>
<u>stone</u> - <u>gone</u>	combine - <u>engine</u>	<u>later</u> - <u>lateral</u>	<u>swam</u> - <u>swamp</u>
<u>count</u> - <u>country</u>	<u>five</u> - <u>give</u>	<u>plane</u> - <u>planet</u>	<u>herring</u> - <u>erring</u>
<u>mou</u> th - <u>youth</u>	<u>earth</u> - <u>hearth</u>	<u>cloth</u> - <u>both</u>	<u>petty</u> - <u>pretty</u>
cond <u>one</u> - anem <u>one</u>	heave - <u>heaven</u>	donkey - <u>monkey</u>	<u>limber</u> - <u>climber</u>
<u>bison</u> - <u>prison</u>	<u>treat</u> - <u>great</u>	<u>bomb</u> - <u>tomb</u> , <u>comb</u>	<u>plinth</u> - <u>ninth</u>

Learning to write English is even harder  
because almost all English spelling patterns have some exceptions

h <u>a</u> m - s <u>a</u> lmon	p <u>a</u> use - p <u>a</u> wn	d <u>ue</u> - f <u>ew</u>	f <u>i</u> lm - <u>ph</u> oto	tax <u>i</u> - <u>acc</u> ent	lot <u>i</u> on - <u>oce</u> an
p <u>e</u> t - th <u>re</u> at	<u>oi</u> l - <u>oy</u> ster	cap <u>a</u> ble - vis <u>i</u> ble	g <u>a</u> p - <u>gh</u> astly	sum - <u>bo</u> mb	fac <u>i</u> al - palat <u>i</u> al
s <u>i</u> t - <u>sy</u> stem	car <u>t</u> - <u>he</u> art	monet <u>a</u> ry- cem <u>e</u> ter <u>y</u>	g <u>e</u> t - <u>gu</u> ess	<u>ne</u> ed - <u>kn</u> ee	music <u>i</u> an - gent <u>i</u> an
p <u>o</u> t - wh <u>at</u>	<u>care</u> - <u>air</u>	bett <u>e</u> r - gramm <u>a</u> r	bag - leag <u>ue</u>	te <u>n</u> - <u>go</u> ne	vic <u>i</u> ous - lusc <u>i</u> ous
m <u>u</u> m - <u>so</u> me	her - <u>fur</u>	bitt <u>e</u> n - butt <u>o</u> n	jet - <u>g</u> em	ri <u>p</u> e - <u>w</u> rite	caut <u>i</u> ous - anx <u>i</u> ous
p <u>u</u> t - <u>fo</u> ot	<u>for</u> - <u>mo</u> re	essence - bal <u>a</u> nce	ag <u>e</u> nt - sub <u>j</u> ect	car - <u>are</u>	act - <u>debt</u>
m <u>a</u> te - <u>wa</u> it	play - <u>the</u> y	du <u>a</u> l - <u>fu</u> el	<u>hand</u> - <u>wh</u> ole	<u>se</u> nd - <u>ce</u> ntr <u>e</u>	separat <u>e</u> -
b <u>i</u> te - <u>br</u> ight	dink <u>y</u> - monk <u>ey</u>	wrest <u>le</u> - vess <u>e</u> l	<u>car</u> rot - <u>kar</u> ate	face - bas <u>e</u>	acrob <u>a</u> t
b <u>o</u> ne - <u>lo</u> an	fly - <u>hi</u> gh	decide - d <u>i</u> vide	kept - <u>ch</u> emistry	mattress - not <u>i</u> ce	willow - <u>wh</u> inge
du <u>t</u> y - <u>be</u> auty	go - <u>sl</u> ow	ins <u>pi</u> re - <u>en</u> quire	rock - <u>trek</u>	<u>sh</u> op - <u>su</u> re, <u>ch</u> ute	zip - <u>xy</u> lophone
seen - <u>lea</u> n	now - <u>bo</u> ugh	<u>ch</u> ip - <u>ce</u> llo	dusk - <u>disc</u>	pass <u>i</u> on - <u>ra</u> tion	wise - <u>si</u> ze
fo <u>o</u> l - <u>ru</u> le	too - <u>flew</u>	bond - <u>blon</u> de	rock <u>e</u> t - <u>occ</u> upy	ignit <u>i</u> on - <u>miss</u> ion	absorb - poss <u>e</u> ss
out - <u>doub</u> t	toy - <u>bu</u> oy		que <u>e</u> n - <u>cho</u> ir	ment <u>i</u> on - p <u>en</u> sion	vis <u>i</u> on - <u>azu</u> re

Some English spelling rules have hundreds of exceptions

1. The **-er** ending pattern of *mother*, *father*, *brother*, *sister* has 140 exceptions: *actor*, *grammar*, *sculptor*...
2. The **ee** pattern of *need* *seed* is not used in at least 323 words: *bead*, *beak*, *beam*, *chief*, *police*, *tedious*, *weird*..
3. Around 1000 ordinary words obey the basic rule of **doubling a consonant** after a short and stressed vowel: *cabb*age, *gall*ery, *stamm*er, *dilemma*, *sorry*; while another 1000 common words disobey this rule: *cabin*, *galaxy*, *cam*era, *lemon*, *fore*st, or use doubled consonants for reasons which are unrelated to keeping a stressed vowel short: *abbrev*iate, *alleg*e, *amm*unition, *arr*ive, *correct*.

There are at least 3500 commonly used English words which are spelt unpredictably

German has only about 800 irregularly spelt words, Spanish 600 and Italian fewer than 400.

That's why Italian spelling can be learnt quickly

while learning to spell English takes a long time and is never completely mastered by millions of learners.

## Spelling errors which pupils commit in tests and examinations show that learners find it difficult to cope with the inconsistencies of English spelling

1. They leave out oddly doubled consonants (*acount, aply, ocurred*) or double by analogy (*accrosss, affraid, leggs*).
2. When identically sounding words are spelt differently, they often pick the wrong alternative, e.g. *there/their, here/hear, two/too/to, its/it's allowed/aloud, see/sea, by/bye/buy, weather/whether*.
3. They fail to insert silent letters (*bild, frend, yung*), put surplus letters in the wrong place (*freind, detb*) or insert surplus letters (*chaeous, nervous, suddenly, vigourously, hellow*).

The inconsistencies of the present English spelling system have neither a logical historical basis nor do they add anything to the beauty of written or spoken English. Modern editions of Shakespeare's plays do not use his spelling conventions. If we simplified many of the difficult current English spellings, by letting them follow basic English spelling rules, the English language would not change in any way, but English spelling would become easier to learn and easier to teach. More people would become literate and confident about writing, and children would have more time to learn many other useful things - and to play.

### How did English spelling become so difficult ?

**After the Norman Conquest in 1066** Norman French became the official language of England. During the next three centuries only a few monks continued to write English. Important and wealthy people even stopped speaking it. English became the language of mainly the lower classes.

**When England began to re-establish its own identity around 1350** the English language had changed a great deal, and English writing had to be rediscovered. Early modern English writers, like Geoffrey Chaucer and William Tyndale who translated the Bible into modern English in 1525, tried to give English a consistent spelling system. Their efforts were repeatedly frustrated. Many people had only written French or Latin before and continued to spell according to French rules (double, couple, route, sure, centre).

**When books began to be printed in England in 1476** the newly invented spelling system was undermined because nearly all the early London printers were foreign. They were usually paid by the line and often inserted additional letters into words to earn more money. They regularly also added extra letters to the last word of a line to make the whole text look neater. Many of their spelling errors, whims and tricks eventually became accepted English spellings.

**In 1525 William Tyndale's English Bible** was condemned as sacrilegious by the Pope of Rome and the English bishops. Nevertheless, even before Tyndale was executed in 1536, many people wanted to possess Tyndale's bible. It was much reprinted in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In order to reduce the chances of censorship, Tyndale's authorship was often disguised, and many of his consistent spellings were changed too, to make the reprints appear more like genuine new editions.

**During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries** many Latin and Greek words were imported into English. These imports were allowed to keep their Latin spellings, because Latin and Greek were regarded as superior to English. This has given us the hundreds of words which according to English spelling rules should have a doubled consonant after a short stressed vowel, but because they are spelt according to Latin rules, they do not: abolish, abominable, banish, body, capital, category, habit, hideous, lily, perish, petal, statue, study, topic, tropical, value, vanish, vomit...

**By 1700 the different influences had made English spelling much as it is now** and Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 fixed our present system. Spelling mainly by dictionary, rather than phonic rules or common sense has been the order of the day ever since.

### Updating a spelling system can make it much easier to learn

Denmark and Sweden have very similar languages. These neighbours also educate their children in similar ways: young children are allowed to learn mostly through play and formal education does not begin until the age of 7. Sweden updated its spelling in the last century. Danish spelling is still very much as Swedish used to be before it was reformed. Swedish spellers always come near the top in all in international comparisons on standards of literacy, Danish spellers near the bottom.

English spelling has also been updated occasionally. For example, we no longer write, '*atte, hadde, olde, shoppe*', or use the letter '*u*' for both the V-sound and the U-sound. '*Over*' used to be written '*ouer*', even in Shakespeare's day. English spelling is in dire need of similar further improvements.