

English • Spelling • Society

Personal View

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SoundSpel [TM] (1999)

by Edward Rondthaler

The self-expression medium for Society members

The views expressed here are the author's and are not necessarily shared by the Society, or a majority of its members.

The Author

This brochure has been prepared by Edward Rondthaler in behalf of the American Literacy Council. He is president of ALC, a vice president of the Simplified Spelling Society and was, during their active years, a member of the Phonemic Spelling Council and the American Literacy Academy. He has been engaged in the spelling reform movement since 1961 and is a strong advocate of the Ripman-Dewey principles of simplification. His writings on spelling reform have been published widely. For his contribution to the reform movement and related areas of typography and letter design he has been awarded an honorary doctorate.

The Simplified Spelling Society

The aim of the Society is to bring about a reform of the spelling of English in the interests of ease of learning and economy in writing.

To this end, it:

- encourages the idea that reform is possible;
- fosters debate on reform methods;
- devises, publishes and promotes potential reform schemes;
- persuades and campaigns;
- has a role as an expert organisation on the subject;
- aims to be of benefit to future generations by introducing a consistent spelling.

This is by no means a new notation. The underlying principles on which SoundSpel is based have a history dating back to 1910, and were published in lexicon format by Walter Ripman and William Archer as "New Spelling" in 1941. A few changes have been made over the years, but the fundamental principles have stood the test of time.

In 1955 Godfrey Dewey in conference with Ripman and others agreed to certain improvements which were then published by Dewey as "World English Spelling" in 1969. In the 1960s Sir James Pitman used these same fundamental principles as a basis for his 'initial teaching alphabet' system which, in view of its strong financial support, might have ushered in spelling reform had he not thwarted that possibility with sixteen grotesque new letters -- copyrighted. In the '70s World English Spelling was adopted by the (U. S.) Phonemic Spelling Council (successor to the spelling reform organization begun by the American Philological Association in 1876 and known, after 1906, as the Spelling Reform Board). Small revisions of the notation, leaning toward better compatibility with T.O., resulted from exchanges between Godfrey Dewey and Edward Rondthaler after 1971 and, in 1986, were published as "American Spelling" by Rondthaler and Edward Lias under the auspices of the American Literacy Academy, successor to the Phonemic Spelling Council. A few minor revisions have been made by Rondthaler and Joseph Little since that time, and what is now "SoundSpel" is the notation used in all programs and software of the American Literacy Council (successor to ALA, PSC, and their predecessors dating back to 1876).

The sheer endurance of the major spelling reform principles developed by scholars almost a century ago pays worthy tribute to the genius of these devoted supporters of simplification.

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SoundSpel [TM]

The questions asked by the Review Subcommittee

1. Is the scheme a new original idea or is it adapted from one developed by the writer or someone else?

The origin of SoundSpel is fully described in 'Background to the notation'.

2. Is it an initial scheme for learning literacy after which learners would transfer to TO, or is it for permanent use by children? by adults?

While SoundSpel may be used as an initial teaching alphabet it is intended as a permanent notation for all. Steps have been taken to make it sufficiently compatible with T.O. to be read at will.

3. The account of the scheme should include a transcription for all the discrete English phonemes in the attached list.

All phonemes accounted for. See [Phoneme Words List](#).

4. On which accent of English is the scheme based? Would you cater for other accents of English? If so, how?

SoundSpel is based on "General American" as put forward by a combination of the pronunciations shown in the 1980 "Oxford American" and the 1969 "Random House" dictionaries. [Webster was not used because its notation is often indecisive.] Oxford American pronunciation supports Columbia University's famed philologist, Mario Pei, who has pointed out in his "History of the English Language" that, particularly in the matter of schwas, Americans tend, more than do the British, to pronounce words as they are spelled. As regional pronunciations in the U.S. diminish, and as Received Pronunciation in England does the same, "General American" tends to become the preferred pronunciation internationally. In carefully spoken General American, then, one may hear, sometimes faintly, sometimes more distinctly, not the pure schwa sound but a trace of the short vowel found in a word's spelling -- a sound somewhere between *novul* and *novel*, *lemun* and *lemon*, *anumul* and *animal*. The American Literacy Council would, of course, welcome breves above these unstressed vowels to identify them clearly, but in view of that unlikely possibility we, as did Ripman and Dewey, retain the T.O. spelling of unstressed vowels unless they clearly conflict with distinct, careful pronunciation, knowing that, in a reformed spelling, they will promote distinct pronunciation, and that they often become the stressed vowel in derivatives such as general/general^y, professor/professor^{ial}, etc.

5, 6 & 7. Is the scheme based on an assumed knowledge of TO or is it independent? Could people who had learned the spelling rules pronounce a text correctly even though they had no knowledge of English? Explain any supplementary spelling rules. Does the scheme indicate stressed syllables?

Nothing is more important than arriving at a notation that stands a chance of acceptance. With that in mind certain compromises have been made, but only after years of diligent consideration.

No change in proper nouns and proper names -- with the possible exception of months and days of the week.

Since we accept the flattery of capital I for 'me', let us extend the courtesy of capital U for 'you'.

No change in *was, as, of, the, he, she, me, we, be, do, to, thru, off, -ful*, and their compounds such as *being, together, thruout, offer, helpful*.

No change in plural-s (jobs), possessive-s (man's), and in 3d person present tense singular (he runs), even tho the s is pronounced z.

No change in the letter pair 'th'-- which occurs more frequently than any consonant digraph. To attempt to distinguish between the voiced and unvoiced 'th' with different spellings (dh, thh, or tth) is so unsettling to present readers that 'th' is retained for both phonemes and is clearly distinguished by sound in the SpellWell+Voice program. Similarly the letter 'x' is retained for both voiced (gz) and unvoiced (ks). The unvoiced occurrences outnumber the voiced 5 to 1, and words normally calling for voiced-x are understood even if pronounced with an unvoiced x.

No change in the spelling of short (schwa) vowels in the unstressed syllables of words like organ, novel, pensil, lemon -- *unless* the spelling clearly misleads in a deliberate overpronunciation of the word, as in "mountain".

Depending on its position in the word or root, the unstressed "1/2-ee" continues to be spelled e i or y as heard in the unstressed syllables of between, detect, reform, champion, editorial, happest, fifty.

rr, as in traditional orthography, indicates that the preceding vowel is short -- carry, merry, sorry.

ll indicates that the preceding 'a' is pronounced 'aw' fall, tall, call.

The long-0 or long-l sound at the end of a word may be written with a single letter -- banjo, go, so, alibi, hi, fli, mi (--but banjoes, alibieing, flies, etc.)

A hyphen following a vowel indicates that that vowel is long: re-enter, co-operaet.

If two vowels -- such as **ea** -- do not match a digraph on the SoundSpel chart, then the syllable ends with the first vowel: re,act (ea is not a digraph), jeeni,us, memori,al, cre,aetiv, etc. In cases of more than 2 vowels the syllable ends with the first digraph: floo,id (oo, being the *first* digraph, ends the syllable -- not flo,oid), hie,est, free,ing, inue,endo, pow,er, continue,ing, pae,abl, evaluate,aet. This simple rule eliminates the need for an awkward and unenglish dieresis (flooïd, hieëst, evaluateäet) as required in the Ripman and Dewey notations.

Written SoundSpel has no indication of stress. When, however, it is spoken with equal stress on all syllables, it is understandable altho graceless. Full guidance in stress is provided by the voice computer program -- SoundSpel+Voice.

8. Please include transcription of the four standard sample texts attached.

See [Sample Texts](#).

9. How does running text in the scheme compare in length with TO?

Based on a million words of running text, SoundSpet is 4.3% shorter than T.O.

10. How big is the change from TO? To what extent does the scheme defer to the appearance of TO?

The overriding problem in getting a simplified spelling accepted is arriving at a compromise that is not too abhorrent to present readers. SoundSpel endeavors to retain as much of the regularity of Ripman's New Spelling as is possible without excessively offending present T.O. readers. Any change, if ultimately accepted, will be accepted grudgingly. Opinions of reformers as to what is acceptable will differ widely. Reformers are the poorest of judges. All reformers can read any proposed spelling with little or no difficulty, and are no judge of what might "fly". Countless informal tests confirm that after an explanation of the long vowel notation, present T.O. readers read the

first two or three lines of SoundSpel with some hesitancy and general amusement, but after that find virtually no difficulty. Writing a reformed spelling is quite another matter, but until one learns the simplified spelling the American Literacy Council's Spell-Well program will automatically convert one's written T.O. -- or a mixture of T.O. and SS -- into full SoundSpel.

11. Outline how you envisage the scheme being used. How would it be introduced and existing publications dealt with?

Inasmuch as SoundSpel has been designed to be reasonably compatible with T.O., we visualize it
(1) As an initial teaching alphabet which, unlike Pitman's ita, could be continued at will.
(2) Since the final computer printout may be printed out by our software in either T.O. or SoundSpel, we visualize that international communications, the preference of foreigners using English, and various economic and social factors -- including common sense -- will gradually increase the number of times when, in calling for the printout of a personal letter, a report, an entire book or publication, the SS-key will be pressed rather than the T.O.-key. The technological problem of changing to a simplified spelling has been solved; the sociological problem remains.

12. Do you regard homophones as a problem and does your system indicate them in any way?

We do not have homophones in speech, we do not need them in writing. Context takes care of everything. Dictionaries show several different meanings for most words -- with only one spelling. The word "set" has 174 different meanings but just one spelling: After I set the clock I was all set to set the table with a set of dishes I'd set my heart on. Even so, the Spell-Well program provides automatic popups on the screen for here/hear, there/their, etc. until it becomes clear that different spellings are unnecessary.

13. Could your system be used easily on most computers and word processors?

SoundSpel is fully adaptable to computers and word processors without change of any kind and without involving additional use of shift keys, etc. The use of all keys is somewhat more evenly spread than at present; the occurrence of 'e', for example, is reduced 9% and that of j and z are tripled.

14. Is the system used in everyday life by yourself or anyone else?

Dr. Helen Bisgard is a consistent user of SoundSpel. Others use it from time to time.

The SoundSpel[™] Notation System

SHORT VOWELS ... *the most frequently heard vowel sound*

a *as heard in* act, at, am, bag, can, tap, carry ... weak unstressed a as in organ
e *as heard in* ebb, end, set, bed, mend, merry ... weak unstressed e as in novel
i *as heard in* it, in, if, tip, pin, gives, banish ... weak unstressed i as in pencil
o *as heard in* ox, odd, hot, boxes, sobs, sorry ... weak unstressed o as in lemon
u *as heard in* up, us, but, fun, mud, gum, love

LONG VOWELS

Silent 'e' gives a preceding vowel its 'long' sound - its 'name' sound

ae *as heard in* A, ate, aim, aid, same, cape, day, they, ways
ee *as heard in* E, eel, eat, feet, field team, scene, ski, key
ie *as heard in* I, ice, tie, eye, ride, guide, fight, buy
oe *as heard in* O, old, toe, only, home, boat, sew, know
ue *as heard in* U, unit, hue, cute, used, utilize, few

VOWEL PAIRS ... *each pair of letters represents a unit of sound*

oo as *heard in* ooze, moon, zoo, cruise, true, flu
uu as *heard in* should, bush, put, foot, book, good
oi as *heard in* oil, boil, noise, loyal, boy
ou/ow as *heard in* out mouth, sound / how, cows, power
ati/aw as *heard in* auto, fraud, cause / saw, sawing, lawyer
ar as *heard in* are, card, far, dollar. ... arr as *heard in* carry
er as *heard in* her, early, mercy, baker. err as *heard in* berry
or as *heard in* order, for, donor, color. orr as *heard in* sorry
ur as *heard in* jury, rural, allure, tour, azure
aa as *heard in* alms, ma, pa, calm, father
air as *heard in* air, hair, care, swear, where, their

For usage notes see items 5, 6,7

CONSONANTS... and consonant pairs

b as *heard in* beg, habit, bib, mob
c/k as *heard in* cat, cup, became, kit, back
ch as *heard in* chin, teacher, church
d as *heard in* dog, ladder, did, bad
f as *heard in* fan, effort, fife, chief
g as *heard in* get, wagon, gag, big
h as *heard in* hat, heel, home, harm
j as *heard in* jam, judge, ajar, edge
l as *heard in* let, lull, table, girl
m as *heard in* me, common, mom, him
n as *heard in* no, manner, nun, tan
ng as *heard in* song, hang, ringing,
nk as *heard in* ink, thank, blanket
p as *heard in* pin, paper, pep, cap
q as *heard in* queen, quake, liquid
r as *heard in* red, roar, trip, cheer
s as *heard in* sit, lesson, sets, base
sh as *heard in* shin, issue, motion, rush
t as *heard in* tap, butter, tot, hit
th as *heard in* thin, method, path
th as *heard in* this, mother, smooth
v as *heard in* van, river, revive, gave
w as *heard in* will, awoke, weather
wh as *heard in* wheat, why, worthwhile
x as *heard in* extra, fox, box, exam
y as *heard in* yes, beyond, lawyer
z as *heard in* zebra, lazy, tease, jazz
zh as *heard in* azure, pleasure, garage

Spelling Scheme Review Subcommittee Phoneme Word-list

pen, copy, happen
back, bubble, job
ten, tight, button
city, better
day, ladder, odd
key, cock, school
get, giggle, ghost
church, match, nature
judge, age, soldier
fat, coffee, rough, physics
view, heavy, move
thing, author, path
this, other, smooth
soon, cease, sister
zero, zone, roses, buzz
ship, sure, station
pleasure, vision
hot, whole, behind
more, hammer, some
nice, know, funny, sum
ring, long, thanks, sung
light, valley, feel
right, sorry, arrange
yet, use, beauty
wet, one, when queen
kit, bid, hymn.
dress, bed
trap, bad
lot, odd, wash
strut, bud, love
foot, good, put
fleece, sea, machine
face, day, steak
price, high, try
choice, boy
goose, two, blue
goat, show, no, cold
mouth, now
near, here, serious
square, fair, various
start, father.
thought, law
north, war
force, four
cure, poor, jury
nurse, stir
courage
happy, radiation, glorious
about, comma, common
influence., situation, annual
intend, basic
stimulus, educate

pen, copy, hapen
bak, bubl, job
ten, tiet, buton
sity, beter
day, lader, od
kee, cok, scool
get, gigl, goest
cherch, mach, naecher
juj, aej, soeljer
fat, coffy, ruf, fizics
vue, hevy, moov
thing, author, path
this, uther, smooth
soon, sees, sister
zeero, zoen, roezes, buz
ship, shur, staeshun
plezher, vizhun
hot, hoel, behiend
mor, hamer, sum
nies, noe, funy, sum
ring, long, thanks, sung
liet, valy, feel
riet, sorry, araenj
yet, use/uez, buety
wet, wun, when qeen
kit, bid, him
dres, bed
trap, bad
lot, od, wash
strut, bud, luv
fuut, guud, puut
flees, see, masheen
faes, dae, staek
pries, hie, tri
chois, boi
goos, too, bloo
goet, sho, no, coeld
mouth, now
neer, heer, seerius
squair, fair, vairius
start, faather.
thaut, law
north, wor
fors, foer
cuer, poor, jury
ners, ster
curej
hapy, raediaeshun, glorius
about, coma, comon
infloens, sichuaeshun, anueal
intend, baesic
stimuelus, ejucaet

Sampl texts transliteraeted into SoundSpel

1. The Star (HG Wells)

It was on the ferst dae of the nue yeer the anounsment was maed, almoest siemultaeniusly frum three obzervatorys, that the moeshun of the planet Neptune, the outermost of all planets that wheel about the Sun, had becum verry erratic. A retardaeshun in its velocity had bin suspected in Desember. Then a faent, remoet spek of liet was discoverd in the reejon of the perterbd planet. At ferst this did not cauz eny verry graet exsietment. Sieentific peepl, however, found the intelijens remarkabl enuf, eeven befor it becaem noen that the nue body was rapidly groeing larjer and brieter, and that its moeshun was qiet diferent frwn the orderly progres of the planets.

2. Britten when yung (Frank Kermode)

We mae nowadaes be chairy about uezing the werd "jeenius", but we stil hav a guud iedeea whut is ment bi it. For exampl, thair ar graet numbers of verry gifted muezishans hoo ar admierd but not calld jeeniuses. But thair ar uthers, manifestly prodijus, performing offen at extraordinerrily erly aejes, a varieety of feets so complex that the muezical laeman cuud hardly imajin, eeven with the moest desperet laebor, acomplishing eny of them, whiel eeven muezishans ar astonisht and we then reech for the guud, handy, vaeg Enlietenment werd and call them jeeniuses. The list incloods Mozart and Mendelssohn; and, despiet all the limiting jujments, it incloods Benjamin Britten.

3. Oed to a Nietingael (John Keats)

Mi hart aeks, and a drouzy numnes paens
Mi sens, as tho of hemlok I had drunk,
Or emptyd sum dul oepiaet to the draens
Wun minit past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not thru envy of thi hapy lot,
But beeing too hapy in thien hapynes,
That thow, liet-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
In sum meloedius plot
Of beechen green, and shadoes numberless
Singest of sumer in fuul-throeted eez.

4. Fuzy-oepaek Orthografical Vizhuns (C Upward)

Thair was a poor boi cuudn't spel
Haf the werds in our langgwej too wel.
His teecheders thaut: "Braen-sik!"
Mum and Dad hoept: "Dislexic?"
Yet the chield rashly jeerd
"Whut the hel !"

MARK TWAIN ON SPELLING REFORM

In SoundSpel the sounds pronounced A E I O U are indicated by a silent 'e' following the vowel - ae ee ie oe ue.

The first time I was in Egypt a simplified spelling epidemic had broken out and the atmosphere was electric with feeling engendered by the subject. This was about five thousand years ago. The simplifiers had risen in revolt against the hieroglyphics. An uncle of Cadmus had been out of a job had come to Egypt and was trying to introduce the Phoenician alphabet and get it adopted instead of the hieroglyphics. The Simplifiers were few, the Opposites were multitudes. Among the Simplifiers were many men of learning and distinction, mainly literary men and members of college faculties, but all ranks and conditions of men and all grades of intellect, scholarship, and ignorance were represented by the Opposites. Uncle Cadmus began an object lesson, with chalk, on a couple of blackboards. On one of them he wrote in hieroglyphics: "At this time the King possessed of cavalry 214,580 men and 222,631 horses, of infantry 84,946 men, 37,264 transport carts, 321 elephants, and 28,954 camels." It filled the board and required twenty-six minutes of time. Then he repeated it on another blackboard in Italian script and Arabic numerals and did it in one minute and a quarter. Then he said, "My argument is before you. One of the objections of the hieroglyphics is that it takes the briefest pupil nine years to get the forms and their meanings by heart; it takes the rest of the nation all their days to accomplish it -- it is a life sentence. If you will renounce the hieroglyphics and adopt written words instead, a tremendous advantage will be gained. By you? No, not by you. You have spent your life in mastering the hieroglyphics, and to you that is simple, and the effect pleasant to the eye, and even beautiful. But I appeal to you in behalf of generations yet to come. Let your sons and daughters adopt the written words and the alphabet, and thus save millions of years of useless time and labor." The Opposite roared and combated his reasoning in the usual way. Those people said that had long been accustomed to hieroglyphics and had dear and sacred memories about them, that they loved to sit on a barrel under an umbrella in the brilliant sun of Egypt and spell out the rabbits and eegs and alligators and sawteeth, and take an hour and a half to the Lord's Prayer, and weep with romantic emotion at the thought that they had, at most, but a few or ten years between themselves and the grave for the enjoyment of this ecstasy.

OBJECTIVES OF THE AMERICAN LITERACY COUNCIL

The focus of the American Literacy Council combines computer and audio technology with sound/sight research built up through decades of study committed to phonic principles. Out of this are emerging user-friendly teaching tools of great promise. They are geared to the deliberate pace of immature or slower learners. The tools cover the entire range from home aids for pre-school children to largely self-teaching aids for pupils of school age, adults needing remedial help, and the growing army of immigrants struggling for literacy in English. Flagship of these is the SoundSpel/SpellWell program for IBM or compatible PCs. It corrects spellings 'on the fly' whether typed in conventional or simplified spelling. Printout is in either T.O. or simplified spelling. An even more advanced version of this program with voice will be available in mid 1998. Another PC-based program, the Phonetic Translator, transliterates common word processing documents from traditional to simplified spelling automatically. An audio tape "Before Teaching the ABC's" gives help to parents of pre-school children in preparing them for writing and reading.

The Council is not a commercial enterprise. It has non-profit, 501c3 tax-deductible status, relies on highly committed volunteers for leadership and technical development, and depends entirely on memberships, contributions, and foundation grants for its humanitarian operation. We welcome your support.

AMERICAN LITERACY COUNCIL