

International English Spelling Congress

The scheme summarised below was one of 35 that passed the sifting process and was forwarded to the Expert Commission following the first session of the Congress. The summary has been revised following comments received during the consultation process.

RichSpel-Short
by
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IESC 4a

Introduction

Why not have a simple way of spelling words?

Wí not hav a simpel wá ov speling wordz that kan bé red bí enéwun hoo kan réd Ingglissh?

Before you decide that it just looks too odd, try reading out the syllables in the sentence above - as they look - with the additional clue that **á**, **é**, **í**, **ó**, and **ú** sound like their vowel names, as in **paid**, **feed**, **pie**, **float** and **hue**.

Maybe its appearance is a bit of a shock at first, but it's also strangely easy to read if you take your eyes off the overall form and look instead at the syllables as you read. This scheme offers a simple way to transform English spelling into a logical system that is easy and quick to learn. As such, it has the potential to eliminate many months, or even years, of the study currently required to fully master written English.

How do you start?

The Quick Reference Guide on the next page provides all you need to use the scheme:

- 6 standard words (sometimes referred to as “sign words”)
- 23 vowel sounds
- 26 consonant sounds
- some basic rules.

A small warning

So they don't take you by surprise, 3 new letter combinations are introduced to cater for gaps existing within Traditional Spelling:

- **uu**, for the vowel sound in [**could**] and [**put**]
- **thh**, for the consonant sound at the start of the word [**thin**]
- **zh**, for the consonant sound in the middle of [**meas**ure] and at the end of [**beig**e].

Note: The Traditional Spelling of a word is shown in [square brackets] where it differs from the scheme spelling.

RichSpel-Short: Quick Reference Guide

[Traditional Spelling is shown in square brackets]

Vowel sounds	
Letters	Examples
Short	
a	pat
e	pet (see Note 1)
i	pit
o	pot
u	pun
Long	
á	pád [paid]
é	fé [fee], bodé [body]
í	pí [pie]
ó	flót [float]
ú	hú [hue] (see Note 2)
Rhotic (with 'r' sound)	
air	hair
ar	hard
ér	bér [beer]
or	ford
ur	fur
er	amber (see Note 1)
Other	
aa	baa
au	fraud
oi	void
oo	food
ou	foul
uu	puut [put]
Schwa (indistinct sound)	
e	given (see Note 1)

Consonant sounds	
Letters	Examples
b*	bat
ch	chat
d*	dog
f*	frog
g*	get
h	had
j*	jam
k*	kit
l*	lap
m*	man
n*	nap
ng	ring
p*	pun
q	qit [quit] (see Note 2)
r*	run (see Note 3)
s*	sun
sh	ship
t*	tap
th	that
thh	thhin [thin]
v*	vat
w	win
x*	exam (see Note 2)
y	yes
z*	zoo
zh	mezher [measure]

* See Note 1 for when to use doubled consonant

Standard words
the, I, U [you], Mr, Mrs, Dr

Suffixes	
Letters	Examples
Plurals	
-z	katz [cats], dogz [dogs]
-ez	busez [buses]
Third person singular verbs	
-z	sitz [sits]
-ez	rinsez [rinses]
Possessive nouns (no apostrophe)	
-z	katz [cat's or cats']
-ez	horsez [horse's]
Past tense of verbs	
-d	splashd [splashed]
-ed	planted
Contractions	
'd	hé'd [he'd]
'l	shé'l [she'll]
'm	l'm
'r	thá'r [they're]
's	let's
n't	wón't [won't]
'v	wé'v [we've]
'z	it'z [it's]

Note 3: Use of 'rr'	
rr is used after short vowels instead of r to avoid confusion with rhotic vowels:	barrel ferret mirrer [mirror] surround torrent

Note 1: 'e' – short vowel or schwa?	
e represents the short vowel sound when:	
• it is in first the syllable of a word:	end, pet, desktop
• or followed by doubled consonant:	nutshell, distress
• or followed by multi-letter consonant:	afresh
Otherwise, e represents:	
• the indistinct vowel sound (schwa): (er is used for rhotic version of schwa):	given, problem (amber, under)

Note 2: Choice in combined sounds	
ú: always use yoo: never use	hú [hue] -
q: generally use kw: compound words	qit [quit] bookworm [bookworm]
x: generally use gz: compound words, or with a 'z' suffix	exam zigzag, dogz [dogs]

Numbers	
normal use:	1 5 15,000
big numbers:	9 milyen [9 million]
fractions:	1/2 2/3 3/4
as words:	wun, too [one, two]

Abbreviations	
Where letter names are sounded:	
Use all CAPITAL letters:	TV OK
Where letters are omitted:	
Show full spelling in (brackets):	Aug. (August) Ch. (Church)

Proper nouns and foreign words (use scheme spelling where practical)		
Underline or italicise and provide scheme spelling in brackets or footnote:	<u>John</u> (Jon)	Moscow ¹

¹ Moskó

Transcription

To allow readers to get an overall impression of how the scheme would look in practice, an extract from a well-known piece of English writing is provided below, first in Traditional Spelling, and then in RichSpel-Short to allow a direct comparison.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit

Traditional Spelling

Once upon a time there were four little Rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter. They lived with their Mother in a sand-bank, underneath the root of a very big fir-tree. 'Now my dears,' said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, 'you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden: your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor.'

'Now run along, and don't get into mischief. I am going out.' Then old Mrs. Rabbit took a basket and her umbrella, and went through the wood to the baker's. She bought a loaf of brown bread and five currant buns.

Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail, who were good little bunnies, went down the lane to gather blackberries: But Peter, who was very naughty, ran straight away to Mr. McGregor's garden, and squeezed under the gate!

First he ate some lettuces and some French beans; and then he ate some radishes; and then, feeling rather sick, he went to look for some parsley. But round the end of a cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor!

The Tál of Péter Rabit

RichSpel-Short

Wuns upon a tím thair wur 4 litel Rabitz, and thair námz wur Flopsé, Mopsé, Kóten-tál, and Péter. Thá livd with thair Muther in a sand-bangk, undernéthh the root ov a verré big fur-tré. 'Nou, mí dérz,' sed óld Mrs Rabit wun morning, 'U má gó intoo the féldz or doun the lán, but dón't gó intoo Mr MkGreggerz garden: yor Faather had an aksident thair; he woz put in a pí bí Mrs MkGregger.'

'Nou run along, and dón't get intoo mischéf. I am góing out.' Then óld Mrs Rabit tuuk a basket and hur umbrella, and went thhroo the wuud too the bákerz. Shé baut a lóf ov broun bred and 5 kurrent bunz.

Flopsé, Mopsé, and Kóten-tál, hoo wur guud litel bunéz, went doun the lán too gather blakberréz: But Péter, hoo woz verré nauté, ran strát awá too Mr MkGreggerz garden, and sqézd under the gát!

Furst hé át sum letusez and sum French bénz; and then hé át sum radishez; and then, féling rather sik, hé went too luuk for sum parslié. But round the end ov a kúkumber frám, hoom shuud hé mét but Mr MkGregger!

The scheme explained in a bit more detail

The scheme uses the 26 letters of the English alphabet, and in addition uses the 5 vowel letters with acute accents; **á**, **é**, **í**, **ó**, **ú**, to represent the long vowel sounds (which sound the same as the 5 vowel letter names):

- **á** as in **paid**
- **é** as in **feed**
- **í** as in **pie**
- **ó** as in **float**
- **ú** as in **hue**

This goes a long way to solving one of the basic problems of English spelling – too few letters for too many sounds; it allows the long vowels to be represented consistently and intuitively without the need for any extra arbitrary letters.

As a general principle, each letter or letter combination represents only the sound for the specific example shown. Therefore, **ch** always stands for the sound in **chat**, not [chorus]. There is one notable exception: the letter **e**, as described below.

Vowels

There are 22 letters and letter combinations representing vowel sounds. 1 new letter combination is introduced:

- **uu**, for the vowel sound in **cuud** [could] and **puut** [put].

In addition, the letter **e** is re-used for the indistinct weak vowel sound or ‘schwa’, but only where no obvious vowel sound can be attributed, such as in the second syllable of **given**.

Consonants

There are 26 letters and letter combinations representing consonant sounds. 1 letter, **q**, is used by itself, rather than as half of the ‘qu’ combination in Traditional Spelling. 2 new letter combinations are introduced for consonant sounds:

- **thh**, as in **thhin** [thin]
- **zh**, as in **mezher** [measure]

Standard Words (also know as signwords)

In addition, 5 Standard Words from Traditional Spelling that do not adhere to the spelling rules of the scheme have been retained, plus a further single letter word, **U**, which has been adopted to represent the second person pronoun [you].

Spelling Rules

The following rules provide some additional information to complement the quick reference guide when writing. However, it should be noted that they are not required for reading.

Rule 1: Use Standard Words where available

The Standard Word spellings should be used where appropriate, but note that **U** and **I** are only to be used for personal pronouns (**ú** and **í** would be used elsewhere).

Rule 2: When 'e' represents the short vowel sound

e represents the short **e** vowel sound (as opposed to schwa) in the following circumstances:

- when **e** is in first the syllable of a word, as in; end, pet, desktop, or
- when **e** is followed by doubled consonant**, as in nutshell, distress, or
- when **e** is followed by a 2 or 3-letter consonant, as in afresh

** Also see Rule 4

Rule 3: When 'e' represents *schwa* (the weak indistinct vowel sound)

e is used for the schwa (indistinct weak vowel) sound only where no obvious vowel sound can be attributed, such as in the second syllable of given. **e** should not be used for schwa in the first syllable of a word, for example, 'about' should be spelled about. **e** always represents schwa when it does not meet any of the requirements of Rule 2.

Rule 4: When to used doubled consonants

This rule is linked to Rule 2. To enable **e** to be identified as the short vowel sound, the consonant immediately following the **e** is doubled, unless the **e** is in the first syllable of the word, or unless the **e** is followed by a 2 or 3 letter consonant sound combination (**ch**, **ng**, **sh**, **th**, **thh**, **zh**). Examples of the use of doubled consonants are; nutshell and distress.

Rule 5: Rhotic Vowels

Rhotic vowel sounds are where the **r** is pronounced in some accents, such as Scottish or General American. These are always denoted by the following letter combinations, regardless of the accent of the speaker or writer:

- **air**, as in hair
- **ar**, as in hard
- **ér**, as in bér [beer]
- **or**, as in ford
- **ur**, as in fur
- **er**, as in amber (the rhotic version of the schwa sound)

(Of these, **ar** and **or** have non-rhotic equivalents, where **r** would not be pronounced; **aa** as in baa, and **au** as in fraud, respectively.)

Rule 6: Use of 'rr' instead of 'r' after a short vowel

rr is used after short vowels (in place of **r**) to avoid confusion with rhotic vowels, such as; ba**rr**rel, fe**rr**ret, to**rr**rent, su**rr**round.

(For consistency, **rr** is also used after the short vowel **i**, as in mi**rr**er [mirror], even though 'ir' is not used to represent a rhotic vowel, or indeed any sound in the scheme.)

Rule 7: Choice between combined sounds

There are a number of letter / letter combinations that are equivalent to 2 other sounds combined. They are to be handled as follows:

ú / yoo:

- **ú** is always used, as in **hú** [hue]
- **yoo** is never used

q / kw:

- **q** is generally used, as in **qit** [quit]
- **kw** is only used when two shorter words are joined, as in **bookkwurm** [bookworm]

x / gz:

- **x** is generally used, as in **exam**
- **gz** is only used when two shorter words are joined, as in **zigzag**, or when **z** is a suffix, as in **dogz** [dogs]

Rule 8: Use 'z' / 'ez' as suffix for plurals and third person singular verbs

The letter **z** is to be used as the suffix to denote plurals and third person singular verbs, as in **dogz**, **katz**, **sitz** [dogs, cats, sits].

Where required for ease of pronunciation, **ez** is used as the suffix, as in **horseez**, **rinsez** [horses, rinses].

Rule 9: Use of 'd' / 'ed' as suffix for verbs in the past tense

For the past tense of verbs, the suffix **ed** is only used when the **e** is sounded as schwa, as in **planted**. Otherwise, **d** is used, as in **splashd** [splashed].

Rule 10: Apostrophes are not used for possessive nouns

The letter **z** is to be used without an apostrophe as the suffix for possessive nouns. For example [dog's] or [dogs'] would both be written as **dogz**. Where required for ease of pronunciation, **ez** is used as the suffix, as in **horseez** [horse's or horses'].

Rule 11: Abbreviations and contractions

Abbreviations are generally discouraged, as the letters used do not generally represent the sound of the word in its entirety. If used, they should reflect the scheme spelling rather than Traditional Spelling; for example, the abbreviation [Addr.] for [Address] should no longer be used, as there is only a single **d** in the scheme spelling, **Adress**. Where an abbreviation is used for the first time in a text, the full word should follow in brackets so that the reader can be aware of its pronunciation, as well as its meaning, for example; **Adr. (Adress)**.

Abbreviations where the letter names are sounded out, such as [tv] and [ok] are to be written in capital letters; **TV** and **OK**.

The use of apostrophes is to be retained for omitted letters in contractions such as **I'm** and **let's**.

Rule 12: Proper nouns and foreign words

Proper nouns and foreign words should generally be written in accordance with the spelling scheme.

In the short term, and possibly the long term for legal and administration processes, retention of the original spellings may be necessary. Such words would be either **italicised** (in print) or *underlined* (handwritten). The equivalent new spelling would be provided to inform readers of the correct pronunciation, either in brackets after the first use of the word, or as a footnote.

Rule 13: Numbers

Digits are generally to be used for all numbers; **1, 2, 3, 4**, and so on.

Commas are to be used to separate thousands, for example; **10,000**, as large numbers would otherwise become unreadable.

For numbers where their length in digits would make reading difficult, descriptors such as **hundred**, **thousand** [thousand], or **milyen** [million] should be used. In such cases, digits should generally be used in conjunction with the descriptors, for example **5 milyen** [five million].

Fractions are to be written as mathematical fractions, for example; **1/2, 2/3, 3/4**.

If numbers need to be written with letters, they should comply with the rules of the spelling scheme, for example; **wun, too, thhré** [one, two, three]. This is likely to be appropriate where numbers or fractions are used as literary devices, for example **haafwá** [halfway], or **wun** morning [one morning].

Notes

The following paragraphs provide further explanation of the scheme and some background to the decisions made during its development.

Homophones

Other than the Standard Words, no provision is made for differing spelling of homophones (words with different meanings that sound the same). Spoken English functions perfectly adequately, even though the spelling of homophones is not communicated. Differentiating between written homophones would therefore appear unnecessary, and more to the point, would undermine the whole basis of predictable spelling.

The suffix 'z' / 'ez' for plurals, third person singular verbs and possessive nouns

The sound denoting a plural, a third person singular verb, or a possessive noun as represented by the suffix 's' in Traditional Spelling is not consistent when pronounced; it is largely determined by the letter immediately before, and can be spoken as a 'z' sound, an 's' sound, or somewhere in between - the majority of speakers are unaware that this difference even exists. Accordingly, any attempt to represent this range of different sounds by using different letters would add unnecessary complexity for little or no practical benefit.

In choosing between the letters 's' and 'z', although a little unfamiliar in appearance, the use of the letter **z** seems the most logical and consistent choice for a number of reasons:

- For the majority of words in Traditional Spelling, the 's' suffix is pronounced with a sound closer to 'z' than 's'.
- The 'es' suffix in Traditional Spelling is generally pronounced 'ez', not 'es'.
- The use of **z** avoids confusion with singular words ending with an 's' sound. For example, if 's' was used as the suffix, the plural of the word **fen** would become 'fens'. This would be indistinguishable from the singular word **fens** [fence], although pronounced differently. The use of **z** avoids this ambiguity and results in **fenz**, reflecting the correct pronunciation.

Accents

The scheme does not propose changes to spellings for the purpose of representing different accents. Many words are already pronounced differently between countries, regions, or even within families - to attempt to provide a comprehensive system of alternative spellings would be counterproductive and introduce too many difficulties and choices when writing. For example, the use of both **maaster** and **master** would seem unnecessary when **master** can already be understood by those with different accents.

There are some words such as the American [airplane] and the British [aeroplane] that are clearly different and should be spelled differently; **airplán** and **airóplán**, respectively.

The difficulty lies in those words in between, so flexibility needs to be retained as it is impossible to predict how usage will develop in the future, whether pronunciations will diverge or converge, or if one form would become the accepted version. An example is [schedule], where a hard 'k' is increasingly

used by British speakers - the use of both **skedúl** and **shedúl** is not considered to present undue difficulty for readers.

The 'y' vowel sound in Traditional Spelling

The pronunciation of the 'y' vowel in Traditional Spelling, as in [simply], tends to vary somewhere between the short 'i' sound, as in pit, and the long 'e' sound, as in [feed] - although in many cases, such as in General American pronunciation, it tends towards the long 'e' sound. It was therefore considered that the use of **é** for this sound was the pragmatic approach, as it provided adequate guidance for the range of pronunciations.

Schwa

The indistinct weak vowel sound (schwa) is probably the most difficult element to deal with, particularly as it can vary so much between different accents. Where an identifiable vowel sound cannot reasonably be attributed to a sound, the letter **e** was chosen to represent schwa. While other letters were considered, **e** was chosen as it already represented schwa in widely varying contexts in Traditional Spelling, and therefore provided a relatively intuitive approach that minimised changes to spelling, particularly when considered in the context of **ez** and **ed** suffixes.

To cater for the rhotic version of the schwa sound in accents where the **r** is sounded, **er** is proposed, as in **amber**. This is distinct from the sound represented by **ur**, as in **fur**.

It is acknowledged that there are numerous specific cases that would require further work to agree on definitive spellings, but this simply reflects the inconsistencies inherent in the pronunciation of many words within the English language. Nevertheless, this scheme provides consistent rules for representing schwa.

Long vowels – the use of diacritics

One particular challenge was how to represent the 5 long vowels. They are currently represented by many, often inconsistent, letter combinations and rules.

The first approach considered was to use the short vowel letter consistently followed by the letter 'e' which would give; **ae**, **ee**, **ie**, **oe** and **ue**. However, when written out, the resulting text became dominated by the letter 'e', proving difficult for a reader to scan, cumbersome in appearance, and difficult to read, for example; **raedeeaeeter**, **situeaeshen** [radiator, situation].

Therefore the use of a symbol in place of the letter 'e' was considered as a way to denote a long vowel. Hyphens and apostrophes seemed to offer a sensible approach as they are also commonly used in Traditional Spelling. This would give; **ra-de-a-ter** / **ra'de'a'ter**, or **situ-a-shen** / **situ'a'shen**. Although this worked well for individual words, it resulted in a very disjointed appearance when included in sentences.

The final approach considered was the use of diacritics: a diacritic is a mark written above or below a letter that changes its usual pronunciation. Although not commonly used in English, they are used in some foreign words that have been incorporated into the English language, such as [déjà vu].

This led to a very neat solution: the familiar letter is retained; it provides a logical system; it shortens words; it is also quite intuitive for current users of English spelling – some words have only very minimal changes; for example, [old] becomes **óld**. A major advantage of this approach is that it does not require an extra arbitrary letter to be added into a word simply to indicate the change from a short to a long vowel.

There are a number of diacritic marks that could be used – this scheme originally proposed grave accents (`), but has now adopted acute accents for their general simplicity and improved appearance of written text (**á é í ó ú**). In terms of handwriting, using the diacritic is no more onerous than dotting an 'i' or crossing a 't'. Standard software for writing on computers, tablets and phones currently provides built-in spelling checks and spelling suggestions, so it is not anticipated that diacritics would present any great difficulty when introduced – many languages currently use diacritics as a matter of course. New spelling software would be written and distributed rapidly via automatic updates, so that typing of accented vowels will become as easy as typing any other letter.

For anyone wishing to try this scheme out now, the acute accent is available on all commonly used keyboards; for further details see the Appendix at the end of this document.

Alternatives to diacritics

If, in particular circumstances there is a problem with the use of diacritics, as a temporary fall-back the letter 'e' can be inserted after the vowel such that **á, é, í, ó, ú** would become **ae, ee, ie, oe, ue**. Further, to assist readability and reduce ambiguity where another vowel follows, the letter 'e' can be replaced with a hyphen, for example **e-**, so [react] could be written as **re-akt** instead of **reeakt**.

Implementation

It is not proposed to introduce the scheme in stages, as it would offer little benefit whilst introducing scope for confusion.

It is considered that the scheme could be learnt rapidly: the only new letter combination that those familiar with Traditional Spelling are unlikely to be able to read is **zh**. The new combinations **thh, uu**, and the letter **q** are intuitive enough to be readily assimilated by most readers of Traditional Spelling.

Writing will obviously require a greater understanding of the rules, but as the scheme has been structured to use letters and letter combinations predominantly from Traditional Spelling, it requires very little new knowledge. The differences are mainly positive: the number of possible letter combinations has been considerably reduced; a relatively small number of new rules will lead writers through a process that consistently produces the correct spellings in the majority of cases. New dictionaries and spelling software would address any remaining ambiguities and provide definitive spellings.

Item for further discussion

Apostrophes

Should the use of apostrophes in contractions such as **dón't** and **she'd** be discontinued as well? The use of diacritics for the long vowels removes much of the ambiguity that previously would have arisen from Traditional Spelling in words such as [she'd], which would have appeared as 'shed' if the apostrophe had been omitted. In RichSpel-Short, this would appear as **shéd**, with no ambiguity in pronunciation. For contractions starting with the personal pronouns **I** or **U**, the use of the diacritic on the capital **I** or **U** would then be appropriate as they would form part of a longer word, so for example, [I'd] and [you've] would become **íd** and **Úv**.

The discontinuation of the apostrophe would also have the considerable advantage of removing the common dilemma of whether or not to provide one in the words **itz** and **it'z** [its and it's].

Appendix - How to type an acute accent

- **Mobile phones and tablets:** A long press of the relevant vowel letter will bring up a menu to allow the accented letter to be selected.
- **Apple keyboards:** Press **Option** and **e** keys at the same time, then release and press the relevant vowel key. (Alternatively, with newer versions, holding down the vowel key will bring up a menu to allow the accented letter to be selected.)
- **Windows UK keyboards:** Press and hold down the **AltGr** key and press the relevant vowel key.
- **Windows US keyboards:** This requires the **US International Keyboard** to be enabled, which is a relatively easy procedure, as described below. Once set up, acute accents are typed by pressing the **apostrophe (')** key, releasing it and then pressing the relevant vowel key.

Enabling the US International Keyboard on Windows

These instructions are for Windows 10 at the time of writing (March 2020). Note that details may change when updates to Windows are issued. For older versions, instructions are currently at:

<https://support.microsoft.com/en-gb/help/17424/windows-change-keyboard-layout>

1. Press the **Windows key**  or click on the **Windows icon**  in the taskbar
2. Scroll down and Click on **Settings**
3. Click on **Time & Language**
4. Click on **Language**
5. Check that the *Windows display language* is set as **English (United States)** – if not:
 - click on the box under *Windows display language* and select **English (United States)**. If **English (United States)** is not an option:
 - click on **add preferred language**
 - scroll down and click on **English (United States)**
 - click on **Next**
 - then click on **Set as my display language** (and **Install** if given the option). **English (United States)** should then be available.
6. Under *Preferred languages*, click on **English (United States)**
7. Click on **Options**
8. Under *Keyboards*, click on **Add a keyboard**
9. Scroll down to near the bottom of the list and click on **United States - International QWERTY**.
10. Click on **Home icon**  to take you back to *Windows Settings*.
11. Click on **Devices**
12. Click on **Typing**
13. Scroll down and click on **Advanced keyboard settings**
14. From dropdown list below *Override for default input method* – choose **English (United States) – United States-International**
15. Click on **X** at top right to close *Settings*

Shut down and restart computer. On restarting, **ENG INTL** should show in the taskbar to indicate the **US International keyboard** is enabled. (Clicking on **ENG INTL** in the taskbar will allow switching back to the original keyboard if required.)