

# THAT SPELLING THING

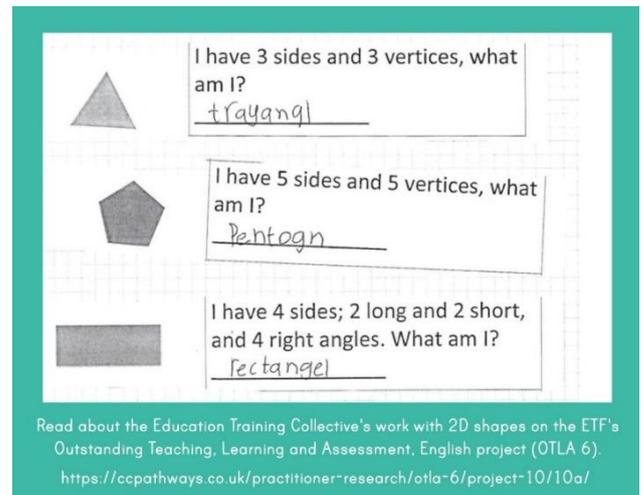
## more than letters

This is an evidence-based method using the 'bones of English' - phonics and morphology - to support memory, ensure accuracy and increase vocabulary. Below are the steps to spelling that frame our CPD sessions. Spelling is a vast subject which, if taught on a word-by-word basis, can feel overwhelming. Instead, learn this approach to spelling and the teaching of individual words will naturally fall into place.



Check everyone can say and use the word.

Spelling is as much about voice as sight. Make sure everyone can say and use the word in speech. If a student writes *trapzum*, they are unlikely to be saying 'trapezium'. If they say 'impossible', they're unlikely to write *impossible*. If they aren't completely secure about what a word means, they are unlikely to use it convincingly in writing. Be explicit about the connection between what we say and what we write.



Start with the everyday root.

If a student asks how to spell a word like 'happening', 'definitely' or 'immediately', take the word back to its everyday root, which means the one you know without looking it up in an etymological dictionary. So, for 'immediately', start at immediate then talk about adding the -ly suffix.

You can make time later to look at 'med-', 'mediate', medium' etc..



Use this approach consistently:

Note that you don't have to 'talk through' this process once it becomes the established approach to spelling in your lessons. Do the groundwork and spelling becomes much easier for everyone.

- syllables

Ask how many syllables are in the word and have them tap or extend fingers – nothing embarrassing. The only reason to count is to slow down and be aware of the parts of the word.

Ask everyone to say the syllables clearly. Teacher 'nudges for meaning' if necessary. For instance, if someone says in/ter/es/ting, nudge to isolate the obviously meaningful part, /ing/. This is not word study – just everyday affixes.

Suggest a spelling voice to clear up any unstressed vowels or unclear syllables. Some words have more than others:  
en/vi/ron/ment

- sounds & graphemes, with or without puzzle pieces

Puzzle pieces make the sound-letter/s relationship explicit and make the correct spelling almost inevitable. Some students will need to build the word syllable by syllable and sound by sound. Others won't need puzzle pieces at all and will write words syllable by syllable. This method can be differentiated for all students.

- everyday morphology & etymology

Looking beyond phonemes and graphemes is particularly useful in subjects where meaningful parts of words are repeated. It's also a great way to approach long words which are visually similar but morphologically distinct. Here's an example based on a training with college vocational tutors who noted that their students struggled to visually differentiate 'physiology' and 'psychology'.

If you use an etymology website like etymonline.com or wiktionary, you will notice references to Greek, Latin, Old French and PIE (proto-Indo-European) roots. Use your judgment about whether the information found there will make spelling easier or not. Make best use of limited memory.

**physiology**  
 5 syllables in a 'spelling voice'  
 9 graphemes - 1 per sticky note  
 Key morpheme - 'phys' physical, physics, physio, physique etc

**psychology**  
 4 syllables in a 'spelling voice'  
 8 graphemes - 1 per sticky note  
 Key morpheme - 'psych' psychic, psychologist, psychotic etc

Extra discussion: the morpheme 'logy' - physio/logy psycho/logy, astro/logy etc.  
 Discuss preferences for spelling voice syllables (above) or morphemic syllables.

T. Millar, 'People, Places & Methodologies - an adventure in phonics for the Post-16 sector',  
 RaPAL Journal, vol 101, Winter 2020, page 15



Ask (don't tell) which bits need extra concentration.

Once you've built or spelt the word, ask each student to decide which is their 'tricky bit' (or bits). They will often be predictable but not always. Give your students ownership of their spelling in a shame-free environment. Reinforce the fact that teachers aren't perfect spellers by letting them know which bits you have to remember. Good spellers know where their gaps are and how to fill those gaps.



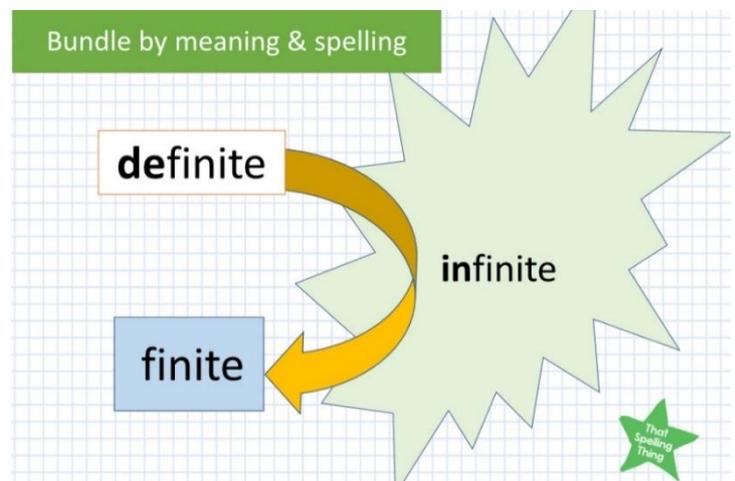
Bundle to support memory and extend vocabulary.

Choose words with the same morpheme even if pronunciation is different – **hier**archy, **arch**-enemy, **arch**bishop, **arch**angel

Choose words with the same spelling pattern – hanging the unknown on the known – **re**levant, **ele**phant

Sometimes you will want to start with a bundle of words to clarify spelling and meaning. Here's a slide from That Spelling Thing whole school training, starting at 'finite' to get to the target spelling word, 'definite'.

Explore the frequency and context of spelling patterns.



## There is no 'cat' in location

How to spell words like  
location, dedication, education, application etc

### Look at patterns and frequency

- <tion> is the most common spelling for a final syllable that sounds like 'shun'
- A single letter <a> always spells the 'ay' sound before 'shun'
- A single letter <c> almost always spells the 'k' sound before 'ashun' (except embarkation)

So, when you hear 'cayshun',  
spell it <cation>

and ignore the cat



### Choose mnemonics carefully

Avoid words within words and stories that have nothing to do with the word you are trying to spell. No more elephants or salmon sandwiches. And be careful that your 'words within words' aren't toxic morphology.



### As far as possible, let spelling words arise from lessons.

Use this method to introduce important subject vocabulary and to tackle frequently misspelt or misread words. Every subject has words that trip everyone up. Isosceles?

If you have a statutory spelling list to master, group the words logically which is usually not alphabetical order. If almost every student spells a word wrong then use puzzles. Once you have spelling framed as a conversation, every student and staff member can take responsibility for improving spelling across the curriculum.



### Enjoy spelling as cumulative and collaborative

Teaching spelling is a process which doesn't happen in an instant but you can enjoy the journey together with your students.

Get in touch to book some spelling CPD.

Training includes all of the above plus:

- the basics of phonics for every teacher
- spelling and the science of reading – what's the connection?
- how to use age-appropriate phonics to improve literacy in every subject and for every student
- quick prompts to create independent spellers regardless of their natural spelling ability
- choosing good mnemonics – and which to reject
- making the most of limited memory
- downloadable resources and support with implementing the strategies

We work with mainstream schools, colleges, adult community learning, alternative provision, pupil referral units, SEMH schools, prisons and more. Ask about bespoke CPD for your setting.

**Please contact Tricia Millar for prices and an order form.**

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