

Beating Your Spelling Whoas

If you missed a few words on the spelling test on page 9, take comfort. I got the job, but two weeks later I wrote this headline across the top of a page one article: "Developer Breeches Environmental Regulations."

According to Patricia Carter, a reading specialist who teaches English composition and creative writing at George Washington, American and Catholic Universities, you can do one of three things about really poor spelling: get a computer with a spelling check program, marry a good speller or enroll in a course specifically for the "spelling-disabled" (such as the "Spelling for Horrendous Spellers" course offered at GW in Washington, D.C.).

For the rest of us just ordinary spellers, Carter has an explanation for poor spelling at the college level.

Since the late 1950s, almost all entering freshmen have had to take Freshman English, or what used to be called "Bonehead English." Poor spelling persists, she says, because students don't get enough specific vocabulary instruction in high school. "High school teachers teach literature well but language poorly. Thus, most students come to college with eighth or ninth grade spelling skills."

"About five to ten percent of people are genuinely spelling disabled," says Carter, who also tutors in a community remedial English program. "For some unknown reason, these students are not able to remember the letters of a word in sequence. They are often highly intelligent and have no other disability. They just can't spell."

Some of us missed out on spelling during our primary education. Due to changing theories of teaching, many did not receive phonetics training. Others were simply traumatized—perhaps by a punitive fifth grade teacher who ridiculed our spelling in front of our classmates. Or were you like the many "military brats," who changed schools so often that they simply missed out on major chunks of spelling rules and vocabulary?

Another major reason for spelling difficulties is hearing. *Hearing?* If you grew up speaking one of America's colorful regional dialects—say "Brooklynese"—you may not actually hear standard pronunciation.

Are you a poor or even horrendous speller? If so, there are compensation techniques. You can have fun sprucing up your spelling.

By Leslie Y. Dawson-Medina

Of course, no sympathy is in order for those of us (probably the majority) who must admit to plain laziness or sloppiness. Do you use bad handwriting to cover up differences between vowels, and hope your scrawl will somehow be interpreted? Or in school did you just not concentrate on learning how to spell? ("Someday, I'll have a secretary who'll take care of it," you told yourself. Or, "Spelling just doesn't matter. I've got more important things to learn.")

English teachers, literacy experts and spelling experts have some general observations on the kinds of mistakes we make in spelling and ways to overcome them.

First of all, learn the rules of spelling. According to Pat Carter, they cover 75 percent of English words. If you learn the exceptions, you'll get another 15 percent right, leaving you with just 10 percent of the irregular, really weird words to worry about.

Make friends with your dictionary. Secondary and college teachers alike stress that too few of their students know how to fully exploit a good one, which will tell you how to divide up the syllables and give you a sample sentence to illustrate a word's use.

We tend to concentrate on word beginnings, and foul up middles and ends of words. Concentrate on the latter.

Most of us were taught to recognize words by sight. However, a good many people learn best through other senses, or a combination: hearing, feeling, analysis (word roots), or memory tricks. Experts now tell us to look at the word; divide it into syllables and spell the word aloud; check the meaning of the word's roots, prefixes and suffixes; and "feel" the word by writing it down, broken into its syllables and then together. Repetition helps too. If you experience a word in all these different ways,

you are most likely to remember its spelling.

Some words lend themselves to memory tricks called pneumonics. Take the problem of whether to write "stationary" or "stationery." If you remember "e" for "envelope," then you'll remember that the paper business is "stationery." The more ridiculous the mnemonic, the better. For example, in trying to remember the "d" in "bludgeon," remember, "There will be 'blud' when I bludgeon him." Silly as they sound, these devices really help.

Everyone should keep a Little Black Book listing spelling and grammatical errors that crop up in their writing. Spend a few minutes a week adding to and reviewing your list. After a while you may see a pattern in the words you miss. Perhaps you have trouble with the double or single "l." If so, get a spelling reference and check the rules pertaining to the problem.

Here are the areas of most common spelling mistakes.

DOUBLE CONSONANTS. These create problems in the beginnings, middles or endings of words. (holy vs. holly?) (unnecessary—is it a dreadful or dreadfull word?)

SILENT "E". Do we retain or eliminate silent "e's" before adding suffixes? (singing vs. singeing)

"Y" ENDING. Why do we spell "cities" but then write "donkeys"?

UNSTRESSED VOWELS. How do we choose among the possibilities for spelling unstressed, neutral-sounding vowels as in baker, elixir, actor, flavor, -able, -ible, -ance, -ent, -ant, -and -ent?

APOSTROPHES. An apostrophe usually means one of two possibilities: a contraction (it's) or a possessive (the man's). Nonetheless, many people get it wrong. Especially in the exception: its, as possessive. (Its fur was wet.)

HAVE FUN IMPROVING YOUR SPELLING

Sprucing up your spelling doesn't have to be sheer grind. Try these methods.

Become a Spelling Vigilante. Go on the attack in raising other Americans' spelling awareness. Join SPELL (Society for the Preservation of English Language and Literature) or the Society for the Encouragement of

(continued on page 27)