

The www.saveyoursundays.com Spelling Scheme

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Author's background

I recently had a dyslexic child in my class. Realising that I had no idea how to meet her needs, I enrolled on a Postgraduate Diploma in Dyslexia and Literacy with Dyslexia Action (validated by the University of York). I was fortunate enough to have my course fees covered by funding from the government of the time (2009), which was made available following the Rose Review on 'Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties'.

The aim of this funding was to increase the number of specialist dyslexia teachers. One of the conditions was that those who benefitted from the funding would use what they had learnt to assist other people in knowing how to best support those with such difficulties - writing this scheme and making it freely available is one of the ways in which I am trying to do this.

Why the scheme was developed

If your school is like mine and most others that I know of, you might have different spelling books that people use, or perhaps people make up their own spellings. Whatever the exact situation, I expect that spelling is not covered in a systematic manner with explicit teaching of spelling rules, and people do not know how to effectively support children who struggle with spelling.

You might also have handwriting books from which children copy out meaningless sentences or paragraphs. Having the children learn to spell as they practice their handwriting 'kills two birds with one stone' and ensures that what they are copying is not meaningless.

Scheme not used in school yet

I will only be introducing the scheme to my school for the first time in 2011/2012, as it was only created in the summer of 2011; therefore I cannot vouch for its effectiveness. The principles behind the scheme and the reasons why I believe it should be used are given below. I feel that use of the scheme in all schools would be of benefit to children and teachers alike, particularly children with special needs, in particular dyslexia. I would be very grateful for any feedback either on the effectiveness of the scheme from teachers who do use it, or from teachers who decide not to use it on the reasons they decided against using it. I make no claims to be an expert in the teaching of handwriting and will be teaching in Reception in 2011 (for the first time) with the aim of encouraging children to begin joining up their writing as soon as possible, for the reasons and rationale given below.

Principles behind the scheme and the rationale for these principles

The principles that the scheme is based on arise from specialist dyslexia teaching, however as with most things, what benefits children with Special Educational Needs can be of benefit to all children. The following are the key principles of the scheme, with the rationale behind them:

- **Multisensory** - dyslexic children often find learning sequences difficult (e.g. the sequence of letters to spell a word) and the auditory channel to their brain is often weaker than the visual or kinaesthetic channels. Regardless of whether all children do in fact have different learning styles, it would seem logical that teaching in a multi-sensory manner would be more effective. The children see the word (visual), say it aloud as they spell it (auditory) and join up the letters (kinaesthetic).
- **Rules explicitly taught** - although English can seem to be random when it comes to spelling, the majority of words are regular i.e. they conform to a given spelling rule e.g. -ll coming after a short vowel sound, as in 'spill' and 'bell'.
- **Using letter names, not sounds** - The significant number of words in English (especially high frequency / common words) that are spelt irregularly e.g. 'their', 'said' etc mean that letter names need to be used. Repetition of incorrect spelling of these high-frequency words e.g. /sed/ for 'said' can lead to this spelling becoming engrained; hence children can benefit from being taught these high-frequency, irregular words relatively early on.
- **Clear distinction between regular and irregular words** - this helps to ensure that children do not over-apply irregular spelling patterns e.g. spelling the word 'air' as /eir/ because that is how the sound is made in the word 'their'.
- **Self-checking** - allowing children to self-check their spellings means that they discover errors for themselves, hopefully making them less likely to repeat these errors. Self-checking is also less damaging to a child's self-esteem than having someone else tell them that they are wrong.
- **In structure** - this means that a word does not introduce a new rule or pattern, unless that is the one rule that is being introduced on that page. For example, the word 'wrong' would not be used to teach the pattern (ng) if the spelling pattern of wr- had not been taught on a previous page.
- **Assessment on words not taught** - this may seem odd, but this means that the assessment sheets assess whether or not the child has learnt the spelling *rule* as opposed to the spelling *words*. If they know the rule, they can then apply that rule to many more words. (However this is only possible where there is only one rule e.g. -ll coming after a short vowel sound. The vagaries of English mean that sometimes a sound can be made in many words by the same combination of letters e.g. the long o sound in 'foam' and 'home').

Initial Assessments

It is crucial that children only start on the scheme after they have achieved some key milestones:

1. Knowing all of the individual letter *sounds* so that they can spell all consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words e.g. 'dog', 'lip', 'tan' etc.
2. Knowing all of the individual letter *names*.
3. Knowing how to correctly form all of the letters.

If children do not know the letter sounds and names they will be unable to learn the irregular words e.g. you cannot sound out the word 'said'.

If children do not know how to form their letters correctly, they should work on this first before bad-letter-forming habits become engrained through repetition.

Ongoing Assessment

The Assessment Tracker can be used to track each child's progress.

Children should achieve all of the goals in the initial assessments before they begin on the scheme. If children have not achieved them, they need to be taught them / work on them.

Children should be given a spelling test using the assessment words for the respective stage and route. You do not need to give children a weekly spelling test, since this only tests if they know the spellings at the end of that week. An end-of-stage test better assesses whether they have learnt the words for good, rather than just for that week.

Further details on assessment can be found in the files entitled *Assessment Tracker* and *Assessment Word lists*.

How should the scheme be used?

From day one - I would suggest the scheme be used as soon as children have been taught to form letters. Depending on the school, this may mean that it is used from Reception (4 to 5 year olds) or from Year 1 (5 to 6 year olds). The reason for this is that teaching joined-up writing 'from the word go' should prevent children with special needs, particularly dyslexia, from falling behind their peers as much as they would otherwise do.

As a catch-up scheme - Alternatively the scheme can be used to support particular children or groups of children who are struggling with spelling and / or handwriting.

Training the children - If children are not taught to use the scheme using all of its features and principles it will not be as effective, particularly for dyslexic children. Realistically parents will probably not read the instructions about saying the letters aloud, the child checking the words for themselves etc, so children need to be trained to do this for themselves.

Once a week in school, once a week at home - this will allow each child to cover a stage

Expectations and Progression

Of course this will depend on factors such as the attainment of the children in a given school and how much time is devoted to teaching handwriting and spelling.

Children don't necessarily need to cover every page in the scheme. If you feel that they don't need to cover a stage, give them the assessment for that stage and see how they get on. It may be that they only need to cover a couple of pages in the stage, in which case you can give them the relevant pages.

Explanation of the order that spelling patterns / rules are introduced

Sounds that only have one spelling pattern are introduced earlier than sounds that have more than one spelling pattern. For example, the sound (wer) is made in the vast majority of words by the letters 'wor' e.g. worm. In contrast, the long (o) sound can be made by several spelling patterns e.g. o_e, oa, o in an open syllable etc. Hence the sound (wer) as 'wor' is covered much earlier in the scheme than the various spelling patterns for long (o).

Alternative routes / Route A and Route B

If a child is unsuccessful on an assessment for a given stage, they should return to the starting point for that stage, but follow the alternative route. The idea of the alternative routes is so that the child or his / her parents do not say 'we have covered these words already'. However, inevitably some of the words in the alternative routes will be repeated. For example, some words in Route B for Stage 4 will be the same as some words that were in Route A for Stage 4, either because there are a limited number of words for a spelling pattern or because a word is an irregular Bart Simpson word. There will also be pages, or even stages, where no route B is available for similar reasons.

Structure of each page of the scheme sheets

Page title - this tells you the stage and page, as well as the route and the rule / spelling pattern being covered.

Intro - this explains the rule / spelling pattern being covered on the page.

Reminder - this reminds the child to say the word aloud, followed by the letters aloud as they write them.

Word list - the list of the words to learn, each to be traced over twice and then written twice. Each word is also given in a sentence to give it a context or to explain what the word means.

Test page - this page has the same structure as the first page, but with the words missing from the sentence so the children can test themselves on the words without looking at them.

Sounds in brackets e.g. (oi); spelling not in brackets e.g. oy

Sounds are given in brackets e.g. (oi), with the letters that used to make or represent that sound in inverted commas e.g. 'oy' or just on their own e.g. oy.

Pen-lifts at syllable splits with longer words

Children should be encouraged to use pen lifts (lift the pen from the page so that not all letters are joined) with longer words. Not doing this will probably make writing longer words uncomfortable and cause letters to become increasingly squashed. Encouraging children to take a pen-lift where words break in to syllables will encourage them to use the strategy of syllabification, which is a crucial skill for spelling longer words.

Note: When creating the pages I have tried not to join letters either side of a syllable split e.g. in the word 'edit', I have tried not to join the letters d and i. Unfortunately the programme that I used to create the pages does not seem to always make this break between letters apparent.

Keeping parents informed

Initially - you should send a letter to parents explaining that the scheme will be introduced and its key features. You should also send a letter out with the spelling homework the first time you send home the spelling sheets to draw parents' attention to how children should complete them to make them as effective as possible. (Both letters for this are available on www.saveyoursundays.com)

Ongoing - each teacher should send home a copy of each child's end-of-stage assessment. This includes a line at the bottom to explain if the child will be moving on to the next stage or not.

Editing pages, File types and Handwriting for Windows

Each page of the scheme is available in two formats: Rich Text Format and PDF. Some, but not all, versions of Microsoft word will open the Rich Text Format files successfully. Most aspects of the pages can then be edited using Microsoft word, however this is not the case with the words in cursive font. If you wish to edit the cursive parts of the pages you will need to purchase a programme called 'Handwriting for Windows' which is available online from the Dyslexia Action shop for £25.52 (price correct on 1st September 2011). Note: I have no commercial ties with Dyslexia Action or those who produces 'Handwriting for Windows', nor do I receive any financial reward for promoting them.

Print, not photocopy, worksheets

Unless you are fortunate enough to have a high-quality colour photocopier in your school, the worksheets are better printed in colour than photocopied in black and white. This is because photocopying makes the letters appear black and it is harder for both the teacher and the children to see where they have traced over the letter.

What to do if children still struggle with a word / page / stage, or spelling in general

The PowerPoint on 'How to introduce the scheme to your school' contains slides at the end on strategies that you can use with children who still struggle with spelling. All of these strategies are dyslexia-friendly.

Using worksheets earmarked for younger children with older children

How you do this depends on the difficulties that the child has. If they struggle badly with handwriting, you may need to go right back to the beginning of the handwriting scheme and work on forming letters in a large font. However, if a child's handwriting is fine, but their spelling is poor you can reduce the size of the font on pages earmarked for earlier years by changing the font size in Microsoft Word, reduce the size when printing the PDF version or reduce the size on a photocopier.

Finally, further stages will be added up for upper Key Stage 2 by Summer 2012.