English spelling is notoriously difficult to master for native speakers and language learners alike. Because English developed from several different language families, and because it so easily absorbs new words from other languages even today, the English language has many different ways to spell the same sound and many different ways to pronounce the same spelling. But improving your English spelling is not impossible: with some patience, you will see a noticeable improvement in your spelling by using some techniques that good spellers use.

**Use a (good) dictionary.**

Though memory aids are useful for memorizing difficult-to-spell words, good spellers never rely solely on memory: they depend on a reliable, up-to-date dictionary. There are many kinds of dictionaries available, both in print and online. Some of your instructors will have strong preferences about spelling conventions (preferring Canadian over American spelling, for example), while others will accept any standard spelling. Most dictionaries identify all standard spellings, but Canadian dictionaries give preferred Canadian spellings before other variants.

An English dictionary designed for English language learners, such as Longman’s *Dictionary of Contemporary English* or Oxford’s *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, can be very helpful for non-native speakers. These dictionaries give more information and often many more examples of words in context to help students select and use words appropriately.

**Be consistent about using British or American spellings in your writing.**

In general, Canadians use both British and American spellings. While Canadians generally prefer the British -our ending in words like *honour* and *colour*, for example, the American -or endings for these common words are also acceptable. The same is true of the -re/-er endings of words like *centre*/*center* and *theatre*/*theater*: Canadians generally prefer the British -re, but the American -er is acceptable. On the other hand, Canadians often follow the American convention of using -ize rather than -ise endings for words like *theorize* or *hypothesize*, but -ise would not be considered incorrect. The key is to remain consistent in your choices throughout a single document. You should not, for example, combine both -ize and -ise forms in the same document.

**Spelling tip:** When adding suffixes to words ending in -our, it is customary to drop the u: *humorous* not *humourous*; *honorary* not *honourary*.

**Always check certain “troublesome” suffixes in your dictionary.**

Some English suffixes confound even the best spellers. Make it a habit always to check these types of words when you are editing or proofreading your work.

- **-able or -ible (-ably/-ibly; -ability/-ability)**
  
  *responsible* / *dependable*; *responsibly* / *dependably*; *responsibility* / *dependability*

- **-ent or -amt**
  
  *apparent* / *blatant*

- **-ence or -ance**
  
  *occurrence* / *importance*

- **-tial or -cial**
  
  *influential* / *beneficial*
Create your own “difficult-to-spell” lists.
Many writers and editors keep a list of words that they find difficult to spell correctly on or near their computer while they work. If you notice that you routinely misspell certain words, consider learning from your mistakes by creating your own personal “difficult words” list. Keeping this list close at hand as you write will save you time and probably eliminate many of your common spelling errors.

Learn the standard pronunciations for frequently misspelled words.
Some common misspellings derive not from difficult combinations of letters but from pronunciations that do not reflect the word’s spelling. The word *mischievous*, for example, is often misspelled because of the common pronunciation “miss CHEEVY us.” Learning the standard pronunciation “MISS chiv us” will aid you in properly spelling the word.

Watch out for homophones, near-homophones, and other easily confusable words.
Many English words have identical or similar pronunciations but different spellings. Using the wrong word of a homophone pair is one of the most common spelling pitfalls for all writers. Learn to check these types of commonly misspelled words carefully during your proofreading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>accept/except</th>
<th>discreet/discrete</th>
<th>oral/aural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adverse/averse</td>
<td>elude/allude</td>
<td>palette/palate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affect/effect</td>
<td>eminent/imminent</td>
<td>populace/populous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>altar/alter</td>
<td>ensure/insure</td>
<td>precede/proceed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boarder/border</td>
<td>elicit/illicit</td>
<td>prescribe/proscribe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>broach/brooch</td>
<td>hanger/hangar</td>
<td>principle/principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>callous/callus</td>
<td>illusion/allusion</td>
<td>right/write/rite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>casual/causal</td>
<td>incidents/incidence</td>
<td>stationary/stationery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>censor/censure</td>
<td>isle/aisle</td>
<td>tenet/tenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cite/site/sight</td>
<td>its/it’s</td>
<td>there/their/they’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>climactic/climatic</td>
<td>led/lead</td>
<td>tortuous/torturous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compliment/complement</td>
<td>liquor/liqueur</td>
<td>waver/ waiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conscience/conscious</td>
<td>lose/loose</td>
<td>whose/who’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desert/dessert</td>
<td>naval/navel</td>
<td>your/you’re</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use your computer spellchecker, but with caution.
A spellchecker can be your first proofreading tool for spelling, as it will catch any combinations of letters that do not form a known English word. But you should never rely exclusively on your spellchecker, because it will miss many incorrectly spelled words that form another English word: a spellchecker will not record *who’s* as a misspelling of *whose*, for example.

Over-relying on spellcheckers is another danger. You may become less conscious of spelling as you write and revise, and you may consequently lose confidence in your ability to recognize correct spellings. Students who over-rely on spell-checkers suffer particularly during exams, when they do not have access to electronic aids.

You can develop your intuition for correct spelling by turning the spellchecker off and devoting at least one revision to spelling. If you sense that a word may be used incorrectly, look it up. This activity will encourage you to become actively engaged in the process of spelling, which is the only reliable way to improve your spelling skills. You can turn the spellchecker back on at the very end of the process, just to be sure that a spelling error didn’t get by you unnoticed. If it did, study the word so that you are less likely to make the same error again.
Become familiar with English spelling rules.

Contrary to common perception, English spelling does often follow certain rules. Becoming aware of these rules can help you avoid some common spelling errors. Many writing handbooks and style guides contain a complete list of spelling rules. Below are four of the most helpful.

**Rule 1:** *i* before *e* except after *c*, or when sounded like /ay/ as in neighbour or weigh.

- This simple rhyme helps explain the difference between the spellings of believe (*i* before *e*) and receive (except after *c*). In general, when the long /e/ sound (ee) is spelled with the letters *i* and *e*, the order is *ie*: shield, field, fiend. Common exceptions are leisure, seizure, and weird.
- When the letters *i* and *e* are used in words with a long /a/ sound, they are usually spelled *ei*: sleigh, feint, heinous.
- When the sound is neither long /e/ nor long /a/, the spelling is usually *ei*: their, seismic, foreign. Some exceptions to this rule are friend, sieve, and mischief.

**Rule 2:** When adding suffixes that begin with a vowel (-able, -ible, -ous, etc.) to words ending in silent *e*, drop the final *e*.

- This rule explains why a word like desire contains an *e* and a word like desirable does not. Other examples include response → responsible, continue → continuous, argue → arguing. We do, however, retain the final *e* when a word ends in -ce or -ge in order to maintain the distinctive “soft” pronunciation of those consonants: notice → noticeable, courage → courageous, advantage → advantageous.
- For reasons of pronunciation, the final *e* is also retained in words ending in a double *e*, e.g. agree → agreeable, flee → fleeing.

**Rule 3:** When adding suffixes to words ending in *y*, change the *y* to an *i*.

- This rule explains the spelling shift that occurs in the following word pairs: happy → happier, plenty → plentiful, body → bodily.
- As English spelling does not generally allow an *i* to follow another *i*, the *y* is retained when the suffix itself begins with an *i*: carry → carrying, baby → babyish.

**Rule 4:** When adding suffixes, double the final consonant of a word only if any of the following conditions apply.

- The final consonant is preceded by a single vowel: *bar* → *barred*. When there is more than one vowel before the final consonant, the consonant is not doubled: *fail* → *failed*. When the final consonant is preceded by another consonant, the consonant is not doubled: *bark* → *barking*.
- The word has only one syllable or has the stress on the last syllable: *fit* → *fitted*, commit → *committed*, prefer → *preferred*. For words with more than one syllable where the stress does not fall on the last syllable, the final consonant is not doubled: benefit → *benefited*, offer → *offered*.
- The suffix begins with a vowel: *prefer* → *preferred*. But if the syllable stress changes because of the addition of the suffix, then the consonant is not doubled: *prefer* → *preference*. Final consonants are also not doubled if the suffix begins with a consonant: *prefer* → *preferment*.
- If the word ends in *l* or *p*, then the consonant is usually doubled in Canadian spelling: *travel* → *travelled*; *worship* → *worshipped*. **Note:** American spelling does not follow this rule.
Some Commonly Misspelled Words

- accelerate
- accessible
- accessory
- accommodate
- acknowledge
- acquaint
- acquire
- across
- aficionado
- aggressive
- amphitheatre
- anecdote
- anomaly
- apparent
- arctic
- asphalt
- auxiliary
- bachelor
- berserk
- besiege
- bizarre
- bookkeeper / bookkeeping
- caffeine
- camaraderie
- Caribbean
- category
- collaborate
- committee
- concede
- consensus
- corollary
- curriculum
- deceive
- de rigueur
- desiccate
- dilapidated
- diphtheria
- diphthong
- dissension
- duly
- dysfunction
- ecstasy
- embarrass
- exaggerate
- excerpt
- exhilarate
- experiential
- February
- fiery
- fluorescent
- fluoride
- foresee
- fulfill / fulfil
- government
- grammar
- grievous
- guarantee
- handiwork
- handkerchief
- harass
- heinous
- hemorrhage
- hygiene
- hypocrisy
- idiosyncrasy
- indispensable
- inedible
- innocuous
- inculcate
- intercede
- invigorate
- iridescent
- irresistible
- laboratory
- leisure
- liaison
- manoeuvre / maneuver
- mayonnaise
- medieval
- Mediterranean
- memento
- millennium
- minuscule
- miscellaneous
- mischievous
- misspell
- non sequitur
- noticeable
- nuptial
- occasion
- occurrence
- offered
- ophthalmology
- pageant
- parallel
- parliament
- pastime
- pejorative
- penultimate
- perennial
- perseverance
- persuade
- phenomenon
- pneumonia
- Portuguese
- preeminent
- prerogative
- privilege
- pronunciation
- proverbial
- pursue
- quandary
- receive
- remuneration
- rendezvous
- renowned
- repertoire
- restaurateur
- rhyme
- rhythm
- sacrilegious
- seize
- seizure
- separate
- sergeant
- silhouette
- smorgasbord
- solely
- soliloquy
- sophomore
- subtle
- supersede
- susceptible
- synonymous
- tariff
- tenterhook
- threshold
- tortuous
- tragedy
- Ukrainian
- vaccinate
- vacillate
- vague
- weird