



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/-ibility)

responsible / dependable; responsibly / dependably; responsibility / dependability

-ent or -ant

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.

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

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