

Do's and don'ts for how to teach spelling

by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.



Read this blogpost on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com):

<https://www.themeasuredmom.com/dos-and-donts-for-how-to-teach-spelling/>

Welcome to the first post in my series about teaching spelling!

How to teach spelling: Do's and don'ts

Let's examine some "do's" and "don'ts" for teaching spelling in the primary grades.

› DO follow a scope and sequence when teaching spelling.

A scope and sequence tells you what to teach, and when. A quality scope and sequence orders skills from simple to more complex.

DON'T create personalized spelling lists for each student – when you watch for words that students misspell and make these their weekly spelling words. Besides being a management nightmare, this method guarantees that you will miss particular phonics patterns because it doesn't let you teach in a systematic way.

Following a scope and sequence for spelling is easy when you follow the next DO ...

› DO choose spelling words that align with your phonics lessons.

At least through first grade, the words your students are spelling should match the sound-spelling(s) they're learning in their explicit, systematic phonics lessons.

For example, if you're teaching students to read CVCE words, their spelling list could include words like *grape*, *dime*, *stroke*, and *flute*.

(Here's my free [phonics scope and sequence](#) if you need one.)

DON'T include a "word of the day" or words from your social studies and science unit if they don't match the focus phonics pattern. Yes, children need to know the meaning of *amphibian*, but this word doesn't fit in a first grade spelling list.

If you decide to include challenge words for students who can handle them, be sure to explicitly teach how to spell each sound. Don't present them as strings of letters to be memorized.

› DO explicitly teach new sound-spellings to your students.

I admit that when I was a balanced literacy teacher, my spelling lessons were not very explicit.

I began each week by giving my students words to cut apart and sort. I thought that having my students *discover* the phonics pattern was better than explicit teaching, so I asked them to figure out the pattern as they sorted the words. (Unfortunately, I didn't know how strong the evidence is for direct instruction.)

Instead, I should have clearly introduced each new spelling and explained when to use it.

DON'T expect students to discover spelling patterns on their own. The research is clear: students benefit from direct instruction.

› **DO teach multiple spellings for each sound without going overboard.**

When teaching the long o sound, for example, students can learn to spell words with *oa*, as in *goat*, and *ow* as in *show*. Teaching a single pattern at a time will really slow you down. And yet ...

DON'T teach too many spellings at once. Too many basal spelling programs flood lists with more than three spelling patterns. This is overwhelming and probably counter-productive.

› **DO teach spelling rules as appropriate.**

Spelling “rules” are also called *spelling patterns* or *spelling conventions*. No matter what you call them, these are generalizations about spelling. As for which rules to teach, and how many, this is up for debate. Stay tuned for the “Must-Teach Spelling Rules” post that will be coming later in this series.

Don't be afraid to teach spelling rules, but make sure that the rules are fairly consistent. Rules like “When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking,” is false more than half the time.

› **DO remember that spelling is about phonology, orthography, & morphology.**

If you're not sure what this means, stay tuned for the next post in this series. Put simply, spelling isn't one-to-one. We're not using a single letter to spell each sound. If that were true, *phones* would be spelled *fonz*. When spelling this word, we consider phonology and spell each sound: /f/ /o/ /n/ /z/. We also consider orthography when we remember that English has certain spelling conventions; one of these is that one way to spell the long o sound is o-consonant e. We consider morphology when we spell the final /z/ sound with an s, because we know that the letter s can be used to denote a plural form.

DON'T call English spelling “crazy.” When we take into account phonology, orthography, and morphology, we recognize that there are good reasons for why we spell words the way we do.

› **DO have your students practice spelling words in meaningful ways.**

Spelling [dictation](#), phoneme-grapheme mapping, and word ladders are all meaningful ways to practice spelling. Check out my [Spelling Mega Bundle](#) for done-for-you activities.

DON'T use activities that turn the focus to memorization, such as writing words five times each or rainbow writing.