

# Should students use invented spelling?

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Read this blogpost on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com/should-students-use-invented-spelling/):

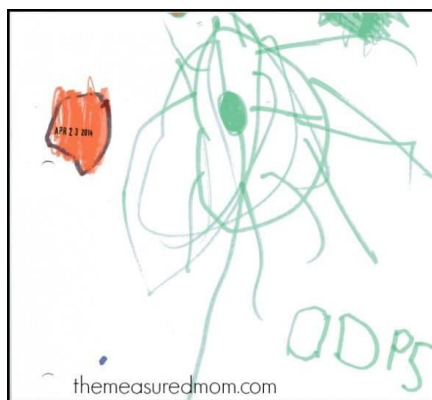
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Invented spelling has always been a hot topic in the reading world. What exactly is it – and should you allow your students to use it?

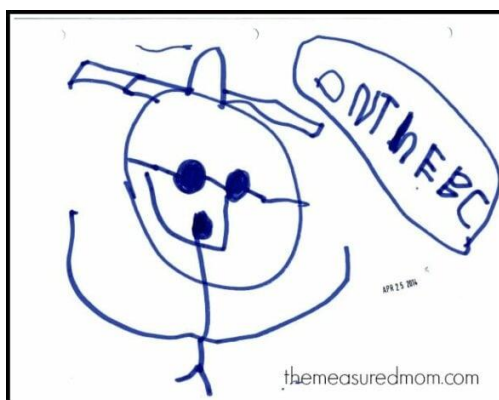
First things first.

## What is invented spelling?

**Invented spelling** is when students spell words based on the phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge that they have, even if the word is not spelled conventionally.



The above octopus, spelled “ODPS,” was drawn by my now thirteen-year-old when he was almost four years old.



He also drew this picture of Pete the Cat, who is on the beach (spelled “ON THE BC”).

Each of these spellings show that my son knew basic letter-sound relationships but did not hear and represent all the sounds when spelling. He had memorized the spelling of “the” but did not know how to spell /ch/ as in “beach.”

In this way, invented spelling is very useful: It gives us a window into a child’s literacy development.

## **The argument against invented spelling**

The name “invented spelling” has turned some people off, because it sounds like teachers are encouraging students to spell however they’d like, with no care or regard for conventional spelling.

This may be why some have attempted to rebrand invented spelling as “temporary” spelling or even “estimated” spelling. (I like both of these rebrands, by the way).

But invented spelling is *not* when teachers allow their students to spell words any which way.

## **The value of invented spelling**

When we remember that spelling is not about memorizing but rather about applying phonology, orthography, and morphology ([learn more here](#)), we understand that students need time to learn correct spellings.

Expecting our young writers to spell everything conventionally is unrealistic. It’s also a bad idea to supply every spelling; when students are writing a string of letters that we provide, without any thought as to why they’re writing those letters, they’re not really learning.

In fact, invented spelling gives students a chance to apply the sound-spellings they’ve learned. It also increases their awareness of phonemes in words (Martins & Silva, 2006).

It even gives them decoding practice as they sound out the words while reading their writing.

To be clear: it's not that we teach our students to invent spellings. Rather, we teach them to *apply* what they've learned from our explicit phonics lessons as they spell words. Since they haven't learned everything about English spelling, some of their spellings will be invented rather than conventional.

## **The importance of feedback**

We shouldn't allow our students to use invented spelling with nary a word from us. Instead, we should gently hold them accountable for the spellings they've learned and correct their spelling whenever it feels that they will learn from the correction.

When my son who wasn't even four spelled *octopus* as "ODPS," I recognized what a major achievement this was and cheered him on.

On the other hand, when my fourth grader spelled *beautiful* as "beyutiful," I gave her a mnemonic for spelling the word correctly: "be-a-U-ti-ful."

It's also important to remember that invented spelling is a means to an end. We can affirm our students' efforts without declaring that their spellings are "correct." We should always look for ways to push their learning.

## **Will invented spelling hurt students' spelling achievement?**

In 2013, Oullette et al found that kindergartners who used invented spelling with feedback had similar (even slightly superior) conventional spelling to other students when they reached first grade.

## **What if students won't write a word unless you supply the proper spelling?**

I had a little boy like that; he's fifteen now. But my refusal to spell every word for him as a little boy often led to tears.

I learned that he did better if I asked him to *attempt* the spelling, circle it if he was unsure, and wait for me to offer the conventional spelling later in the day.

Another thing you can do is recopy the correct letters from the child's spelling and leave

blanks for the missed letters; see if the student can correct the spelling.

For example, when my daughter spelled *physical* as “phyisicle,” I could have written the word this way and encouraged her to try filling in the blanks.

ph\_sic\_ \_

This allowed her to see all the letters she got right while also decreasing the size of the task.

When should students stop using invented spelling?

When children have finished the phonics curriculum (usually by the end of second grade), teachers should expect conventional spelling most of the time.

When editing their writing, students can be taught to identify words that might be misspelled and find their correct spellings.

As always, teachers should explain *why* a word is spelled a certain way whenever possible. For example, if a fourth grader spells *militia* as *malisha*, you can share the spelling of *military* and explain that the words are related. Then guide the student to the correct spelling.

**A final tip:** When a student asks you for a spelling, always ask him/her to do their best spelling of the word *first* (even if it’s on a separate piece of paper). This will give you a window into the child’s spelling development, allow you to celebrate all the letters he or she got correct, and give you a focus for helping him or her spell the word correctly – rather than simply naming a string of letters the student will likely forget next time.

Did this post help you clarify what invented spelling is, and why it’s useful? The following articles may also help.

### For further reading

- [Explicit spelling instruction or invented spelling?](#) by Tim Shanahan
- [Invented spelling and spelling development.](#) by Elaine Lutz on Reading Rockets

## References

Martins, M. A., & Silva, C. (2006). The impact of invented spelling on phonemic awareness. *Learning and Instruction, 16*(1), 41-56.

Ouellette, G., Sénéchal, M., & Haley, A. (2013). Guiding children's invented spellings: A gateway into literacy learning. *Journal of Experimental Education, 81*(2), 261-279.

Find more posts in this spelling series here: <https://www.themeasuredmom.com/all-about-teaching-spelling/>

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