

## **A Teacher's Introduction to the *Basic Speller***

The right writing of our English . . . is a certain reasonable course to direct the pen by such rules as are most conformable to the propriety of sound, the consideration of reason, and the smoothing of custom jointly.

— Richard Mulcaster, *The Elementarie*, 1582

In London over four hundred years ago Richard Mulcaster, an Elizabethan language arts teacher, published his spelling text called *The Elementarie*. Mulcaster was disturbed by people who even then were claiming that the English spelling system was nonsensical and needed reform. He was particularly disturbed by those who complained that the English alphabet needed to be made more phonetic. Mulcaster used a political allegory to argue that a mature spelling system has to do more than spell sounds, for sounds are too changeable and diverse, and to follow them alone leads to great confusion:

In the beginning, Mulcaster said, Sound was King, with complete dominion over spelling. But the sounds of speech vary a great deal from person to person, from place to place, from time to time. And eventually in the Kingdom of Sound, great confusion set in. The people, confused and unhappy, petitioned their King for relief. King Sound was predictably put off by their request, but in time they convinced him to agree to have Custom and Reason join him in the rule of spelling — or, as Mulcaster called it, "right writing." It was only with considerable reluctance that Sound gave up his complete dominion — and the price for his agreement was his remaining the primary member of the triumvirate. Sound would have to remain the primary rule — but now English spelling would be controlled by "the propriety of Sound," "the smoothing of Custom," and "the consideration of Reason" — jointly. Sound remains primary, but his vagaries are made more sensitive to convention and word history because of the influence of informed Custom and more regular and ruly because of the influence of orderly Reason.

Mulcaster's very Elizabethan allegory is not just quaint. It reflects quite accurately the early history of our language: Originally the spelling of Old and Middle English was quite phonetic, and Sound was king. During the late Middle English period, with the spread of literacy, this phonetically-based system led to considerable confusion. And by the 16th century, Mulcaster's century, the phonetic system was being replaced by one that also took into account the history and meaning of words and the demands for reason and regularity that one finds in any living system. Custom and Reason were given a larger role.

## On Phonics: Sounds and Letters

In recognition of Sound's primacy, the *Basic Speller* has the students do a great deal of work with the relationships between sounds and their spellings. Although these relationships are surprisingly complex at times and very seldom 100% predictable, they are patterned and they can be learned.

One thing we must remember here is that there are two different sets of phonics patterns: one for spellers, another for readers. Readers start with letters for which they are trying to find the sounds. Spellers start with sounds for which they are trying to find the letters. The main complaints about the way most spelling texts treat the role of Sound are that (i) they oversimplify it, (ii) they keep saying the same things over and over, grade after grade, and (iii) they often confuse spelling-phonics and reading-phonics in ways that must create problems for students. The *Basic Speller* strives very hard not to oversimplify. It strives to treat the role — and rule — of Sound with the complexity it deserves, spreading this complexity across the years of the program so that the students are constantly learning new things. And the *Basic Speller* consistently deals with just one of the two sets of phonics patterns — phonics for spellers.

In the *Basic Speller* students are made familiar with the sounds of American-English and with their major spellings. In the early lessons they start with perceiving (hearing the target sounds in words), relating certain letters with the sounds, and getting a sense of the major spellings. In later lessons they analyze the different contexts in which one spelling is chosen over another.

The debates over phonics and look-and-say and other approaches to teaching reading and spelling can be resolved, or at least tempered, once we recognize a developmental sequence at work: There is clearly a phonetic (or phonic) stage that nearly all people go through as they first begin to learn to read and write, a stage they **must** go through. Students in college and high school with serious remedial problems usually need to go back and be sent through that stage because either they never had a chance to go through it or else they turned down the opportunity when it was offered them. But just as most readers and writers **must** go through this stage, they must go **through** it. You can't spend the rest of your life worrying about sound-and-spelling correspondences. So after students have been "phoneticized," as it were, they must then be "de-phoneticized"! They must be freed from the one-man rule of King Sound, whom Mulcaster describes as "in authority tyrannous." They must be moved toward a more meaning- and sight-based approach to words. They must learn of the role of Custom. They must move from the analysis of words into sounds to their analysis into elements.

## The Elements

As Mulcaster saw four hundred years ago, our spelling system does more than spell sounds. It also spells meanings — which brings us to the subject of elements. **Elements** are the smallest parts of written words that add meaning to the words and are spelled consistently from word to word. Although most elements are exactly one syllable long, syllables and elements are quite different things: Syllables are defined strictly on the basis of sound, with no concern for meaning or spelling. Elements are defined on the basis of meaning and spelling, with only a secondary concern for sound. For example, the element *sign* occurs as the base in the words *signs*, *signal*, *design*, *designation*. In each of the four words the element *sign* is pronounced differently: Sometimes it is all in one syllable; sometimes it straddles two syllables. Sometimes you can hear the <g>, sometimes not. Sometimes the <s> spells a [s] sound, sometimes a [z]. Sometimes the <i> spells a long sound, sometimes a short one. If all we worried about were the sounds, these words would be harder to spell than they need be. But if we notice, too, that they all contain the element *sign*, plus a few other short elements, then spelling the four words is fairly easy, systematic, and not at all "irregular." Life under Sound "smoothed" by Custom — once we understand it — is simpler than life under Sound alone.

Recognizing word elements and how they go together are important parts of the *Basic Speller*. Students learn that there are three kinds of elements: **prefixes**, **bases**, and **suffixes**. Bases provide the core of meaning for the word. Bases are the elements that can have the other elements called prefixes and suffixes added to them. Some suffixes simply mark things like noun plurals (*cat* vs *cats*) or past tense verbs (*post* vs *posted*) or comparative and superlative adjectives (*calm* vs *calmer* and *calmest*). Other suffixes change a word's part of speech. Thus the suffix *-al* changes the noun *form* into the adjective *formal*. And the suffix *-ize* changes the adjective *formal* into the verb, *formalize*. The *Basic Speller* includes a great deal of work with both kinds of suffixes, for working with them not only strengthens the students' spelling skills, it also helps them with their work in grammar and vocabulary.

## Tactical Patterns and Rules

One of the results of Custom's role in English spelling is the existence of elements, which tend to reflect the customary, or historical, spelling of certain word parts, in spite of changes and variations in pronunciation. Another result of Custom's role is the existence of tactical patterns and rules — or just plain **tactics**. Tactics have to do with the customary way sounds or letters combine or follow one another. The best known tactical rules in English spelling have to do with the **strings** VCV (vowel-consonant-vowel, with its regularly long head vowel) and VCCV (vowel-consonant-consonant-vowel, with its regularly short vowel). But a different kind of tactical rule helps students understand, say, when to spell [k] at the end of a one-syllable word with <k> or with <ck>: If the preceding letter is a consonant, the [k]

will be spelled <k> (*stink, silk*). If the final [k] is preceded by a long vowel or vowel digraph, the final [k] will again be spelled <k> (*week, lake, book, auk*). But when it is preceded by a short vowel spelled with a single letter, the final [k] will be spelled <ck> (*wreck, stick, rock*).

Tactics also includes a number of **shortening rules**. For instance, in the string VCV, if the first vowel is stressed, it is regularly long. But shortening rules can pre-empt this VCV rule, leading to a short first vowel. The *Basic Speller* is the only spelling program that teaches the students about shortening rules. Later books in the program deal with three such shorteners — the Suffix *-ity* Rule, the Third Vowel Rule, and the French *Lemon* Rule, the three of which account for stressed short vowels in VCV strings in hundreds and hundreds of words, such as *timidity* (via the Suffix *-ity* Rule), *general* (via the Third Vowel Rule), and *lemon* (via the French *Lemon* Rule).

### The Procedures and Processes

The role of Custom leads to the existence of elements and tactics. It also leads to the regular **procedures** that take place when elements combine to spell words, for these procedures help us preserve the customary shape and sound of the words. There are just a few of these combining procedures. The most common and most powerful is **simple addition**: Unless there is some specific reason for making a change, the elements simply add together with no changes at all in their spelling. Far and away most of the time when elements combine to spell words, they do so through simple addition. The second and third most important procedures are **final <e> deletion** (as in the word *deletion*, which equals *deleté + ion*) with a final <e> deleted) and **twinning** (as in the word *twinning*, which equals *twin + n + ing*), with the final <n> being doubled, or twinned). The *Basic Speller* has the students do a great deal of work with simple addition, final <e> deletion and twinning.

**Processes** are historical changes that have occurred and usually result in complications to sound-to-spelling correspondences. Probably the most important processes are assimilation and palatalization. In general, **assimilation** is the process whereby a sound becomes more similar to a sound near it. In order to reflect the change in sound, a spelling very often will get changed. For instance, in English there are a number of words that contain the Latin prefix <ad-. The <d> in <ad- assimilates in certain situations — that is, the original [d] sound and usually the letter <d> itself become more similar to the sound and letter immediately following. Besides the lessons it teaches us about pattern and order in our spelling system, the assimilation in prefixes is important in a spelling program because, first of all, it helps the students understand the reason for double consonants up front in hundreds and hundreds of words — such as *arrange, collect, suppose, effect* — and *assimilate*.

Work with assimilation also helps the students begin to get control over the champion spelling demon in English — that is, the reduced vowel sound **schwa**.

Schwa is the first vowel sound you hear in words such as *arrange*, *collect*, *suppose*, and one pronunciation of *effect*. Schwa is a problem because (1) it is extremely common (most unstressed vowels tend to reduce down to schwa), and (2) since it is spelled with all of the vowel letters and digraphs, there is no way to sound out a word so as to hear how to spell schwa. But if you recognize that words like *arrange*, *collect*, *suppose*, and *effect* contain assimilated versions of, respectively, the prefixes <ad-, <com-, <sub-, and <ex-, then you can see that the schwa sound is spelled, respectively, <a>, <o>, <u>, and <e> in these words.

The second important historical process, **palatalization**, is a change that occurs in a word's pronunciation. A consonant sound that is normally pronounced well forward in the mouth— especially [t], [d], [s], or [z]—is pushed back and pronounced against the hard palate. Palatalization is particularly common in words that come from Latin. For instance, in the word *society* the <c> spells the alveolar sound [s], but in the related word *social* the sound is pushed back to the palate and becomes [sh]. Palatalization is also involved in such related pairs as *native* and *nation*, *missile* and *mission*, *graded* and *gradual*.

The *Basic Speller* has students working a great deal with elements, tactics, procedures, and processes in order to do justice to the subtle and sometimes complex sound-to-spelling relationships that exist in English. For instance, if we are trying to explain how to spell the sound [n], we can say, "Spell the sound [n] with the letter <n>," and we will be right 80% to 90% of the time. But we can be right 99% of the time if we add some understanding of elements, tactics, and processes, and say, "Spell [n] with the letter <n> unless you know of a simple addition, a twinning, an assimilation, or a VCCV string at work that would cause it to be spelled <nn>" — as in *innocent* (with simple addition), *fanned* (with twinning), *annex* (with assimilation), and *funnel* (with a VCCV string). The remaining 1% of the spellings are the very rare <gn>, <kn>, <pn>, and <mn> (as in *sign*, *know*, *pneumonia*, and *mnemonics*) — which can be listed, described, and explained in historical terms (again, Custom is at work!). So in order to explain sound-to-spelling relationships to the students, the *Basic Speller* helps them understand processes like simple addition, twinning, final <e> deletion, assimilation, and palatalization.

### On Reason, Analysis, and Induction

The *Basic Speller* acknowledges the role of Reason in our spelling system by demonstrating that English spelling is not whimsical and unreasonable. It is, instead, very reasonable. It is something that can be understood and taught — if you go at it carefully, thoroughly, reasonably. It is much more regular and rational than our experience, teachers, and textbooks may have led us to believe.

In order to convey this regularity to the students, the *Basic Speller* leads them through an active process of analysis and induction: A certain problem is posed — for instance, What are the common spellings of the sound [j]? The students are given a

carefully selected list of words containing the sound [j], a list that they hear, see, and say. They are asked to find the [j] sounds in each word and to mark the letters that spell those sounds. Then they are asked to sort the list into three groups: words in which the sound [j] is spelled with the letter <j>, as in *jar*; words in which [j] is spelled with the letter <g>, as in *gem*; and words in which [j] is spelled <dg>, as in *bridge*. The listening and saying, the seeing and marking, the sorting and recopying focus the students' attention on the target sound, on its common spellings, and on the relationship between sounds and spellings. Finally the students do a fill-in sentence that summarizes what they have by now heard, seen, said, and written: "The sound [j] is spelled three different ways: \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_." That is, they write a description of their own inductive analysis. The mental tasks involved in such lessons include visual and aural discrimination, articulation, copying out, sorting and grouping, and arriving at a summary conclusion. Later lessons then help them see when a given spelling of [j] is most likely to occur: <g> only before the vowel letters <e>, <i>, and <y> (which explains the function of the silent final <e> in *bridge*); <j> usually before <a>, <o>, <u> and practically always at the beginning of the element; and <dg> after short vowels where you would normally expect a double consonant. Later lessons also deal with palatalized spellings of [j], like the <d> in *gradual* and with complex spellings like the <dj> in *adjective*.

Working with problems dealing with procedures — such as, "When do you twin the final consonant in a word?" — the students are again given carefully controlled word lists. They work with these words — sometimes analyzing them into their elements, sometimes combining elements into words, sometimes noticing sound-to-spelling relationships, always sorting the words in various ways to reveal the underlying patterns. Then they are given questions that help them organize and display the results of their analysis. More questions lead them to descriptive summaries of what they have discovered. Thus they go — analyzing and synthesizing, organizing and displaying data, observing the data, describing what they see and hear, setting up hypotheses and testing them. And finally they have written a description of a spelling procedure that is reliable and powerful enough to be rightfully thought of as a spelling rule.

The approach is active, analytical, and inductive — as befits a system with Reason one of its masters.

### On Tests

In the *Basic Speller* this emphasis on analysis and reason extends even to the tests. The students spell the words, then analyze them in some way relevant to their current lessons, and then decide whether they still agree with their original spellings. Even the tests, then, encourage the student to see that words are things with a structure that can be analyzed and understood.

How many words a student spells incorrectly is perhaps the least important information a spelling test can give. Any spelling test is to a great extent an arbitrary

and accidental selection of words. Also, as any spelling teacher can verify, there are some misspellings that are just a little bit wrong and some that are really wrong! The student who misspells *sufficient* as <suffitient> surely shows more word sense than the one who misspells it <sufishunt>. But in the typical spelling test a word is either right or it is wrong. There are no degrees, no in-betweens. And thus there is no chance to say things like, "This is a much better misspelling than your last one." However, the analytical test format the *Basic Speller* uses makes it possible to say things like that to students, who benefit from having any signs of progress pointed out to them. Probably the most important information to be gained from an analytical test of this kind is the students' performance in the analysis section of the test, for it is here that students can begin to deal not just with the question of **how** a word is spelled, but **why** it is spelled that way. And it is here that we can begin to get insight into the students' misspellings — which are often lapses in induction and analysis as much as lapses in memory.

### On Structure, Rules, and Memory

The role — and rule — of Reason is extremely important to spelling instruction. Over the years at the Academic Skills Center at Central Washington University and while working with younger students in elementary schools, we have found that with this analytical and inductive approach, students can learn descriptions — or spelling rules — that are detailed and thorough enough to be reliable and useful. One of the main problems with the traditional "spelling rules," with their notorious exceptions, was that they were taught deductively and thus had to be overly simplified, in order to make them short enough to be memorized. Oversimplified rules always let too many exceptions leak through. However, when they are taught inductively and analytically, rules can be detailed enough not to be burdened with all those exceptions. We have found, too, that with this approach students can learn something about doing work with their minds — analyzing, observing, patterning, setting and testing hypotheses, writing descriptive summaries.

Although students who like to memorize things certainly may and do memorize a certain part of what they learn through these inductive techniques, the *Basic Speller* does not normally require, or even particularly encourage, self-conscious memorizing. Simply by going through the process, slowly and carefully, doing the thinking and writing asked of them, the students learn English spelling and become more sensitive to the pattern and order in English words, without resorting to uninformed memorizing.

Much of the trouble students have with spelling arises from the fact that they have very little sense of the structure of words. Words exist for them as fairly undifferentiated blurs of sounds or letters, and the students are often unable to see enough structure to have much to hold onto in the word. They literally aren't able to hear or see as much in the word as they might — and thus they have trouble remembering its shape, especially when it comes time to try to spell it. The *Basic Speller* works on the theory that the more you know about the word, especially about its structure, the more you can hear and see in the word, and thus the more you have to

remember it by.

### On Holdouts

Some of the patterns or rules the youngsters induce will have some holdouts. Students are sure to think of some of these holdouts and want to know about them. (There seems to be a perverse satisfaction in finding exceptions to spelling rules.) Students who find such holdouts should be praised. The ability to identify an exception indicates mastery of the rule — as well as indicating a lively and creative mind. So the first part of responding to a student's discovery of a holdout is to acknowledge it and give the student credit. Then what to do? The basic principle upon which I operate is that there is always a reason — always a reason for a pattern or rule, and always a reason for any holdout to that pattern or rule. Sometimes the reason is rather elusive and messy and not a very good reason at all, but there is always a reason. I recommend a hierarchy of responses to holdouts:

First, very often the holdout is only apparent, for the spelling in question is part of a sub-pattern or sub-rule that represents a more localized, and stronger, bit of organization. If it seems worthwhile one can spend a few minutes at least pointing out the sub-pattern. There is no need to make a big deal out of it: Simply provide the youngsters with enough information to reassure them that the conclusions and rule they have worked for are still good and worthwhile and that the holdout indicates a degree of patterned complexity that we are choosing not to deal with in much detail this early in the game. The shortening rules mentioned earlier are a rich source of only apparent exceptions. The student who points out, for instance, that *lemon* doesn't fit the VCV pattern should be praised for the insight and then told that there is a smaller, but stronger, rule that can overrule the VCV pattern, that *lemon* is an instance of such a rule, and that later lessons will discuss it. The least desirable response to such a student would be to frown and to say that every rule has its exceptions or that *lemon* is the exception that proves the rule (whatever that might mean).

So far as these more local sub-patterns are concerned, the general principle in any field of analysis is that in cases of conflict more local, specific rules pre-empt more global, general rules. The text or the teachers edition will try to identify those sub-patterns and sub-rules when it seems important to students working at the level at which the youngsters studying this book would be working. The teachers edition will provide the materials for special fill-in lessons on at least some of them, so that if it seems wise, you can stop and have the students work a bit more with this insight that has been offered up by one of them.

Second, we must remember that the language is changing, which means that these patterns and the rules that describe them are also changing. Generally, holdouts to rules are newer words that have not yet been fully integrated into the English system. For instance, the word *poi* is a holdout from the tactical rule that says that the diphthong [oi] is spelled <oy> in at the end of words. But *poi* is a very recent and specialized

adoption from Hawaiian.

Third, we must remember that there is a tension at work between, on one hand, integrating new words into the English patterns and, on the other hand, preserving the foreign or exotic look (and at times even sound) of the word. This latter pressure to preserve the foreign flavor is often a kind of snob appeal, and it explains the persistent French look and sound of words in gourmet cooking, high fashion, and the cultures of wines and perfumes.

Fourth, sometimes words get respelled for intelligent enough reasons, but the result is to complicate things for the average speller and to do some violence to native English rules and patterns. Thus, for instance, the unexpected <b> and <c> in *debt* and *indict*, each of which was added during the late Middle Ages to reflect the Latin sources of the two words, *dēbitum* and *indictare*.

Fifth, sometimes mistakes get made and get institutionalized into the language. Thus we have the odd spelling of *ptarmigan* (mistakenly taken to be related to the *pter+* base meaning "wing" that occurs in words like *pterodactyl* and *helicopter*).

The teachers edition will try to comment on holdouts that are likely to arise. But if a student comes up with one that is not covered in the teachers edition, you can check the word index in *American English Spelling*. If that doesn't help, you can check the etymology in a good desk dictionary to see what insight it might offer. There are also some excellent etymological dictionaries that can be very helpful. Three of my favorites are Eric Partridge's *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary*, C. T. Onions' *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, and *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, edited by Robert Barnhart. And, of course, the absolute best of all sources for most matters relating to English words remains the *Oxford English Dictionary*, now in its second edition and available on CD-ROM and online.

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Four hundred years ago Richard Mulcaster, an Elizabethan teacher of language arts, saw clearly that the English spelling system really does make sense, that it can be described, taught, and learned. Today, with the advantage of all that we have learned in the intervening centuries, we can see that Mulcaster was right, perhaps more right than even he realized. Today, as we continue to work to find our way "back to the basics," Mulcaster's parable is still valuable: The basics of spelling are more complicated than we may like, but they are also more regular and patterned than we have sometimes been led to believe — more sensical, more learnable, more teachable — more ruly.

The *Basic Speller* attempts to get to the basics. Like Mulcaster it assumes that English spelling has pattern and order of many different kinds, pattern and order "conformable to the propriety of sound, the consideration of reason, and the smoothing of custom." It also assumes that if students are to learn the basics of the "right writing" of their

English, this marvelous pattern and order is something with which they should be familiar.