

Helping the Problem Speller without Suppressing the Writer

Elizabeth Grubgeld

"Sum of my teachers throw out high school," my student titled his first in-class writing in the non-credit pre-college English course I teach. In the course, I see writers and readers with diverse problems—fluency, difficulty in developing ideas or focusing on one in particular, problems in reading comprehension, syntactic derailment, and a wide variety of errors. Most will soon be called upon to write exams, lab reports, and papers in philosophy, history, or biology, and I have 15 weeks in which to prepare them.

With their problems in focus, organization, and basic fluency, dropped words, articles, and inflections—as well as a fundamental lack of control over the limits of the sentence—there seems little time for spelling. Yet for disabled spellers and their readers, spelling mistakes stand out as the most prominent feature of their writing. The misspellings occasionally obscure meaning even for a basic writing instructor trained to discover significance in the most fractured prose; surely misspellings block the communication of meaning to less searching or tolerant eyes. And because these students have been told for years to "do something about spelling" and are frightened of their capacity for error, most problem spellers are not fluent. When each new word on the page opens another possibility of error, nothing could be more difficult than freewriting or revision. How can we teach composing and spelling simultaneously so that the disabled speller is helped while other writers are equally benefited?

One common response has been to downplay the problem. As Mina Shaughnessy reminds us in her classic work, *Errors and Expectations*:

Of all the encoding skills, spelling tends to be viewed by most teachers and students alike as the most arbitrary, the most resistant to instruction, and the least related to intelligence . . .

It is the one area of writing where English teachers themselves will admit ineptness. Outside the academy, however, the response to misspelling is less obliging. Indeed, the ability to spell is viewed by many as one of the marks of the educated person, and the failure of a college graduate to meet that minimal standard of advanced literacy is cause to question the quality of his education or even his intelligence.¹

Clearly, it is an abdication of responsibility to allow someone to wander through our high school and college classes who continues to make, perhaps, ten errors in spelling per one hundred words while writing an original composition.

The lists of homonyms and common rules in the back of most handbooks and rhetorics are insufficient, and the common practice of circling errors does little more than provide the instructor with a rationale for assigning a low grade. Instead of searching for the perfect textbook or wasting time circling mistakes, we should begin to teach spelling as part of the students' creation of original texts. Treating spelling as an important—but quite distinct—part of writing allows inexperienced writers to develop fluency and revision skills while providing essential practice. Having students correct spelling as part of publication procedures helps develop motivation. Finally, using student writing as a resource enables us to individualize error analysis and teach students to analyze and recognize their own mistakes.

It's crucial to maintain the distinction between questions of development, shape, or meaning and

questions of correctness, just as we maintain a distinction between the reader's demand for worthwhile content and the reader's demand for clean copy. A student, hungry for some empirical evaluation, may focus exclusively upon error. Others, flinching from evaluation, may feel their purposes and meanings are lost upon a reader who jumbles all responses into marginal commentary. How is a student to determine a hierarchy of significance among comments along the page? Spelling errors remain yet another part of the cloud of error,

shadowing or becoming indistinguishable from considerations of meaning. To emphasize the difference between composing well and spelling well, we can use two notebooks, two colors of ink, two rooms, two meeting times, or even two teachers for the two tasks.

Having students correct spelling as the final stage in preparing material for publication acknowledges both its importance for readers and places it, accurately, at the end of the process. Writing can easily be published for a class or school audience, or occasionally for some outside audience, and may include excerpts of reading notes, tests, or journals, as well as entire papers. Students are motivated when they're assured of a genuine, interested audience, and only after some time can we expect a writer to accept the teacher as a reader or the concept of a hypothetical audience. Only after students accept such audiences should we begin to study misspelled words in less overtly public writings, although we can keep a list of those words to make a more accurate analysis of individual error patterns.

As we begin to analyze spelling errors, we see

which words students can or cannot spell as they emerge in real writing, and numerous studies suggest that these will differ from the words spelled or misspelled in exercises and quizzes in which they appear unnaturally and out of context. And we are provided with essential guides to the types of errors particular to individual writers; we can find clues to the hodge-podge of rules, visual memories, and systems of logic by which individuals make spelling choices. With some order made of the chaos of their spelling mistakes, students gain confidence in their ability to recognize and correct errors, since they are able to proofread for a limited list of possible mistakes. They may develop a sense of responsibility for *their* words, as they claim ownership and control over them. With guidance, they can begin to see the structures within their words which provide keys to similar words.

Such progress will admittedly be time-consuming and slow. Students will probably not learn to control their errors in one semester, not even one year, but they can learn to use critical eyes. They may not cease making errors, but they can learn to recognize them. Although some students best respond to an approach which emphasizes visual recognition, for most, visual drills must be supported by knowledge of the systems which govern spelling. By isolating words with similar patterns and generalizing from the accumulated examples, students may inductively grasp the nature of such systems.² In doing so, they discover not only general principles but strategies for application of those principles to the infinite number of words in their potential vocabularies:

We may select words from students' lists which readily illustrate general principles,³ recognizing the less classifiable words but perhaps not attempting to find a pertinent pattern or rule to explain them until other, similar, words emerge in the students' writings. Occasionally students may be able to articulate the spelling of words which defy classification, and we may find the residue of some misremembered pattern or misunderstood concept. To succeed at describing such processes, as well as at drawing general principles from more regular words, spellers must have the appropriate vocabulary. They need to be able to use and understand such terms as long and short vowel, consonant and consonant cluster, prefix, suffix, root, diacritic, homophone, missing letter, letter reversal, and word confusion.⁴ They also need a workable way to articulate and remember general principles and some understanding of syllabication and pronunciation.

As patterns emerge, we must restrain from recognizing them for our students; students must themselves discover the pattern or rule. Mina Shaughnessy, Thomas Friedman, and Lou Kelly offer different but equally sensible alternatives to the usual way of describing rules. Shaughnessy suggests that rules be written as a series of conditions for which the writer may examine the word in question. Simple rephrasing into question form, she found, gave the writer a set of directions to follow rather than a confusing maxim to memorize. In his argument against the inadvertent visual reinforcement of error, Friedman prohibits the enumeration of exceptions and odd spellings, as well as the common practice of teaching confusing words—like homonyms—“in tandem.” He suggests that instead, we teach words within the context of their meaning. Instead of grouping *there* and *their* for example, we should teach *there* in conjunction with *here* and *where*.⁵ In *Dialogue to Discourse*, Lou Kelly advises that when students have difficulty with a word, they conversationally write an answer to the question, “What confuses me about this word?” Usually, the answer will expose the rule underlying the correction. Students who discover that they are uncertain when reaching the ending of a word they spell as *poten-chul* are ready to discuss suffixes and the *tial* suffix in particular. We need to provide extra drill with other words similar in structure.

Before students can discuss structural patterns, they must understand the concept of a syllable and

root words, prefixes, and suffixes, but most basic writers do not think of words as divisible, only as arbitrary groupings of letters. While they may have heard such terms as root, prefix, and suffix, the terms lack clear meaning. Students might practice dividing words as syllabic internals. Their answers need not be dictionary-perfect as long as they demonstrate an increasing awareness of standard divisions. Secondly, spellers who do not hear unstressed syllables may come to hear them more often if trained to read aloud. It is often difficult to make basic writers read their own work sufficiently slowly and even more difficult to help them recognize the discrepancy which so often exists between what is on the page and what they read aloud from the page. The suggestion to “read as slowly and with as much choppiness as someone who can barely read” may help relieve some of the desire to appear fluent which undoubtedly lies at the heart of their overly rapid oral readings.

Oral reading can be combined with practice in recognizing grapheme-phoneme correspondences; it is clear that *tial* commonly represents the sound *chul*. But in many situations, sounding out is insufficient when not supported by drill in visual recognition and application of principles, and it can be disturbingly deceiving. In an observable speech pattern of the Rocky Mountain states, for example, most vowels blur to a short *i*. Thus we see *ixcited*, *agin*, and *dispair*. Pronunciation cannot be changed, so some alternate method of emphasizing the blurred vowel must be established. In some words, the vowel is more clearly articulated in a variation form of the word: *majer* is less likely to be chosen when the student thinks of the word *majority*. Admittedly, basic writers often have difficulty thinking of other forms of words, since words—like letters—are viewed as random items. But with practice and considerable drill on syllabication, compounding, and affixation, they may become more adept at the task. If nothing else, they may—as Mina Shaughnessy suggests—become aware what aspects in their speech are likely to be misrepresented by their habitual first choice of graphemes.

We cannot simply make suggestions and tell the students about them; neither does the identification of a structural pattern insure its use. Students must have a way of drilling themselves on visual recognition, application of principles, and contextual usage. In the back of *From Dialogue to Discourse*, Lou Kelly outlines a spelling chart which is

the basis for the spelling cards I now use with disabled spellers. I have students buy a set of 5 × 8 cards and punch holes in the top so that the cards may be arranged on rings (cards are more permanent than notebook paper and can be continually looked at). Using large handwriting and skipping lines to reinforce visual impact, the students list *their* words alphabetically. Some other method of indexing—perhaps by type of error—might be more effective, but alphabetical ordering can allow cross-indexing to accommodate recognition of error types. To avoid reinforcing error, I have them write only the correct version of the word and underline the confusing part. If the confusion arose from failing to hear syllables, they may leave spaces between syllables. To the right, students write in their own words why the particular word was difficult. To the right of that column, they record some means of remembering the correct spelling—other words with similar spellings, other forms of the word which highlight the difficult section, some sentence or other mnemonic device—whatever the student decides upon. At some point in the semester, the instructor should sort through the cards to list the most frequent types of errors and provide extra drill in those areas.

Writers can practice with these cards to improve their chances of spelling accurately and proofreading efficiently. Besides simply concentrating visually or writing the words repeatedly, they might make up stories or record random thoughts while using the words. They can tape-record the list or their stories and take dictation from the tape. In conference with the instructor, they might try to spell any similar words—including entirely

unfamiliar words—which the instructor finds in the dictionary. In its most significant function, the list works as a proofreading guide when writing for public presentation.

With much repeated practice—at least one hour a week with the instructor—severely disabled spellers can begin to make automatic the conceptualizations they have discovered and recognize their own errors when proofreading. Most importantly, spelling error has been lifted out of the morass of undefined error and identified as an act *distinct* from composition. As readers' needs are recognized and accommodated, spelling is valued yet put into its proper place as a last step before publication of a text.

Notes

1. Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford, 1977), pp. 161–62.

2. A helpful source for the instructor is Genevieve Love Smith, *Spelling by Principles* (New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, 1966). Through accumulated examples, it demonstrates how to make educated choices between graphemic options.

3. Some words may be difficult to classify and are perhaps best ignored, at least for a time; it is crucial to exercise the student's growing ability to classify with confidence.

4. See Shaughnessy, p. 177.

5. Thomas Friedman, "Teaching Error, Nurturing Confusion: Grammar Texts, Tests, and Teachers in the Developmental English Class," *College English* 45 (April 1983): 390–99.

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Study: Only 25% of students in U.S. write at grade level

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — About three-fourths of the nation's school children demonstrated only partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed to write proficiently for their grade level, the Education Department reported.

Testers asked 60,000 fourth-graders, eighth-graders and 12th-graders to write stories, personal essays, reports about events or experiences and persuasive pieces.

The tests and score levels were determined by the National Assessment Governing Board, a quasi-governmental body created by Congress to act as an independent judge of education standards, and the testing itself was undertaken by the Education Department.

Overall, more than three-fourths of the students showed at least a basic level of writing — or partial mastery of the prerequisite knowledge and skills fundamental to proficient work at their grade level — and roughly one-fourth of the students in each grade level were at least proficient.

"These findings are important, because how well students write at the end of the 20th century is an indicator of how well they will be able to communicate and reason in the beginning of the 21st century," Gary Phillips, acting commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, said in remarks prepared for the test results' release.

Only 23 percent of fourth-graders wrote at

the proficient level or above, which meant — in the testers' terms — that they could deliver a solid academic performance and competently write about challenging subject matter.

Eighty-four percent wrote at the basic level or above, and 16 percent were below the basic level.

For eighth-graders, 27 percent were at least proficient, 84 percent were at least basic, and 16 percent were below basic. For 12th-graders, 22 percent were proficient, 78 percent were basic and 22 percent were below basic.

And in each grade group, 1 percent of students wrote at an advanced level, which signified a superior performance.

The testing, which took place in 1998, included students at both public and private schools.

It was the first national test of students' writing skills since 1992, but the Board said the results could not be compared because the tests used a new methodology.

Not surprisingly, students who wrote better were used to writing several drafts and had teachers who talked to them about writing.

Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Texas and Wisconsin had the highest percentages of students writing at the proficient level. Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, South Carolina and Hawaii had the lowest percentages of students writing at the proficient level.

JOURNAL RESPONSE RUBRIC

Name: _____

Date: _____

Check the boxes that apply to this journal response, then mark an "X" in the top bar to indicate approximate placement on a continuum. Use the back for comments: what you noticed as strengths and weaknesses, and what you found interesting and unique.

NOVICE	APPRENTICE	PRACTITIONER	EXPERT
<input type="checkbox"/> little writing	<input type="checkbox"/> some writing (includes reactions, summaries, and connections to other books or experiences, evaluates and analyzes)	<input type="checkbox"/> adequate writing (includes occasional reactions, summaries, and connections to other books or experiences, evaluates and analyzes author's craft or elements of literature)	<input type="checkbox"/> thorough writing (includes thoughtful reactions, summaries, and connections to other books or experiences, evaluates and analyzes author's craft or elements of literature)
<input type="checkbox"/> includes no examples to support opinions	<input type="checkbox"/> includes occasional, incomplete or unclear examples to support opinions	<input type="checkbox"/> includes sufficient examples to support opinions	<input type="checkbox"/> includes clear, complete examples to support opinions
<input type="checkbox"/> no variation in forms of written response	<input type="checkbox"/> occasionally varies forms of written response	<input type="checkbox"/> clearly varies forms of written response	<input type="checkbox"/> skillfully and creatively varies forms of written response
<input type="checkbox"/> no attention to details (lacking in organization and neatness with many spelling and punctuation errors)	<input type="checkbox"/> slight attention to details (lacking in organization and neatness with some spelling and punctuation errors)	<input type="checkbox"/> adequate attention to details (somewhat organized and neat, with mostly correct spelling and punctuation)	<input type="checkbox"/> thorough attention to details (well organized and neat, with correct spelling and punctuation)

Comments: