

# HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER

## GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

### Spelling: Spelling Rules

Spelling in English can be very tricky because, although there are some rules, there are many cases where rules don't apply, and there are often exceptions to the rules themselves.

Many words in English vocabulary come from a variety of languages including Old English, Ancient Greek, Latin, and French, among others. Because of this, English words like **physics**, **pneumonia**, and **pizza** aren't spelled the way they are pronounced.

English is also famous for silent letters. Some English words with silent letters include **knight**, **right**, **gnaw** and **night**.

Often the way we **say** a word is different from how the word is spelled when it is written. It is common when speaking not to pronounce every sound in some words. For example, the word **recognize** may be pronounced *reconize* or **library** may be pronounced *libery*. But in writing these words must be spelled correctly: **recognize**, **library**.

Another cause of spelling errors in English is **homonyms**: words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings and spellings. Some examples are **principle/principal**, **write/right**, **know/no**, **accept/except**.

The same problem often occurs with words that are not exact homonyms, but that are **similar** in sound. For example: **except/expect**, **suppose/supposed**, **formerly/formally**.

The problem of spelling can be compounded for people whose first language is not English. Words in English may be similar to words of Spanish, French, Italian, or German, but the rules of spelling are often different. For example, many words that begin with **es-** in Spanish, begin with **s-** in English. For example **special**.

Also, unlike in some languages, the same sound may have several possible spellings in English. For example, the sound [i] pronounced **ee**, may be spelled any of the following ways:

<i>e</i>	as in <b>complete</b>
<i>ee</i>	as in <b>feet</b>
<i>ea</i>	as in <b>read</b>
<i>ei</i>	as in <b>receive</b>
<i>ie</i>	as in <b>piece</b>
<i>y</i>	as in <b>happy</b>

The best thing to do is to keep a list of words that you misspell. It may be helpful to try to analyze them for the types of errors you make most often. The rules outlined below may help you in some cases, but often you will simply have to memorize and practice. To aid memorization, try **reading**, **saying**, and **writing** each word several times.

## SPELLING RULES

### RULE #1: i BEFORE e

If you learn this short poem, you will be able to spell many hard-to-spell words correctly:

Write *i* before *e*  
except after *c*  
or when sounding like *a*  
as in *neighbor* and *weigh*.

Does this rule apply all the time? No, there are exceptions, but it does work most of the time for most of the words you use on a daily basis. Now, let's examine the parts of the rule.

"Write **i** before **e**"

Examples:    believe            piece                            priest

EXERCISE    Fill in the blanks, following the above examples

ach\_\_ve                    p\_\_r                            v\_\_w

"except after **c**"

Examples:    receive            deceive                            receipt

EXERCISE    Fill in the blanks, following the above examples.

conc\_\_ve                    dec\_\_t                            conc\_\_t

"or when sounding like **a**/as in *neighbor* and *weigh*"

Examples:    reign            feint                            freight

EXERCISE    Fill in the blanks, following the above examples.

v\_\_n                            r\_\_ns                            w\_\_ght

EXCEPTIONS:    Now, let us discuss the exceptions to this rule.

1. The rule applies only when the **ei/ie** cluster is pronounced as one syllable; it does not apply when the letters are divided between two syllables, as in **deity** and **science**.
2. If the word is borrowed from a foreign language, then the rule may not be applicable; examples are **sheik** and **reichsmark**.
3. Some words simply don't follow the rule; examples are **heir**, **height**, **weird**.

The following is a list of some of the exceptions to this rule.

ancient	Fahrenheit	prescience	sleight
caffeine	financier	protein	stein
codeine	height	reveille	surfeit
counterfeit	leisure	seize	their
either	neither	sheik	weird

RULE #2 drop the final SILENT e

This rule concerns words that end in a silent **e**, such as **make** and **argue**. When a suffix is added to a word ending in a silent **e**, drop the **e** if the suffix begins with a vowel, for example **-ing**, **-ile**, ; keep the **e** if the suffix begins with a consonant, for example, **-ment**, **-ly**, **-ful**.

Example:	<i>word</i>	+	<i>suffix</i>	=	<i>new word</i>
	serve	+	-ile	=	servile
	page	+	-ing	=	paging
	educate	+	-ing	=	educating
	rampage	+	-ed	=	rampaged
	time	+	-ly	=	timely
	atone	+	-ment	=	atonement

EXERCISE Apply the rule to the following words, using the above examples.

<i>word</i>	+	<i>suffix</i>	=	<i>new word</i>
time	+	-ing	=	_____
time	+	-ly	=	_____
dispose	+	-able	=	_____
create	+	-or	=	_____
attune	+	-ed	=	_____
excite	+	-ment	=	_____

EXCEPTIONS: Once again, there are exceptions to this rule. Here are a few of the exceptions:

argue	+	-ment	=	argument
due	+	-ly	=	duly
intervene	+	-tion	=	intervention
judge	+	-ment	=	judgement
true	+	-ly	=	truly
canoe	+	-ing	=	canoeing
convene	+	-tion	=	convention

RULE #3: CHANGING y TO i

This rule applies when you add a suffix to a word that ends in *y*. Change **y** to **i** before a suffix when the **y** is preceded by a consonant. For example, **apply** + **-ance** = **appliance**. Do not change **y** to **i** when the **y** is preceded by a vowel; for example, **pay** + **-s** = **pays**.

Examples:	<i>word</i>	+	<i>suffix</i>	=	<i>new word</i>
	flab <u>by</u>	+	-est	=	flabbiest
	laz <u>y</u>	+	-er	=	lazier
	byw <u>ay</u>	+	-s	=	byways
	pr <u>ay</u>	+	-ed	=	prayed

EXERCISE Following the above examples, add the given suffix to each word.

	<i>word</i>	+	<i>suffix</i>	=	<i>new word</i>
	lonely	+	-ness	=	_____
	merry	+	-ly	=	_____
	prey	+	-ed	=	_____

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule.

EXCEPTIONS:

1. If the suffix itself begins with an **i**, as in, **-ing** or **-ine**, then do not change the **y** to **i** before adding the suffix.

Example:	<i>word</i>	+	<i>suffix</i>	=	<i>new word</i>
	fry	+	-ing	=	frying
	marry	+	-ing	=	marrying
	worry	+	-ing	=	worrying

2. Certain irregular verbs have exceptions to this rule in their past tense form. You can memorize the irregular past-tense pattern of these three verbs:

<u>Present</u>	<u>Past</u>
pay	paid
say	said
lay	laid

#### Rule #4: Doubling the Final Consonant

This rule is very useful, but it is a bit more complicated than the previous ones. You may find it a bit confusing, yet the rule is worth studying, because it explains why there are two r's in **preferred**, but only one in **preference**.

The rule for doubling a final consonant has three parts.

1. A final consonant may only be doubled before a suffix beginning with a vowel; e.g., **-ed**, **-ing**.
2. The final consonant must be preceded by a single vowel, e.g., **get** + **-ing** = **getting**  
**but greet** + **-ing** = **greeting**.
3. The base word must either be only one syllable, sit, stop, spit or it must have an accent on the final syllable when the suffix has been added, **beginning**, occurrence, but not **reference**, or **development**

An accented syllable is one that is emphasized or is the loudest one you hear.

Examples--Double the consonant:

mop	+	-ing	=	mopping
begin	+	-ing	=	beginning
submit	+	-ed	=	submitted
tan	+	-ing	=	tanning

Do not double the consonant:

Jump	+	-ed	=	jumped
develop	+	-ing	=	developing
prefer	+	-ence	=	preference

EXERCISE Apply the rules to these words:

<i>word</i>	+	<i>suffix</i>	=	<i>new word</i>
fog	+	-ed	=	_____
omit	+	-ing	=	_____
wag	+	-icy	=	_____
regret	+	-ed	=	_____

The above rules may be helpful in some situations, that is, assuming you can remember all the parts of each rule and all the exceptions too. Finally, English spelling is a complex, challenging, and even chaotic system. Your surest resources have to be a good memory and a good dictionary...and good luck.

If it's any comfort, English is somewhat famous for being hard to spell, as the poem below, published anonymously in 1965, illustrates:

I take it you already know  
Of tough and bough and cough and dough?  
Others may stumble but not you,  
On hiccough, thorough, laugh and through.  
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps,  
To learn of less familiar traps?

Beware of heard, a dreadful word  
That looks like beard and sounds like bird,  
And dead: it's said like bed, not bead—  
For goodness' sake don't call it "deed"!  
Watch out for meat and great and threat  
(They rhyme with suite and straight and debt.)

A moth is not a moth in mother  
Nor both in bother, broth in brother,  
And here is not a match for there  
Nor dear and fear for bear and pear,  
And then there's dose and rose and lose—  
Just look them up—and goose and choose,  
And cork and work and card and ward,  
And font and front and word and sword,  
And do and go and thwart and cart—  
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!  
A dreadful language? Man alive.  
I'd mastered it when I was five.