

A PROGRAMMED APPROACH TO GOOD SPELLING!

RICHARD C. BAGGETT

This word

sounds like

describe

duh + scribe

sensitive

sens + uh + tive

probably

prob + uh + bly

does

duhs

terrible

terr + uh + ble

possess

puh + sses

effect

uh + ffect

- 20 We like it so much, we'll even stick the *uh* sound in when it doesn't belong:

This word

is often mis-
pronounced as

athletics

ath + uh + letics

- 21 How can we make sense of the *uh* sound if it can be represented by any of the vowels? What does the good speller do? First, he notices a peculiar fact about when the *schwa* occurs in the word. Did you notice in the list above that the *uh* most occurs in an unaccented syllable?

Examine the list again, but notice this time the word with the heavy accent does *not* contain an unaccented part has the *uh* sound.

This word

soun

deSCRIBE

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Preface

As fascinating as the study of spelling may be for some people, most students, especially if they are not very good at spelling, think of it as a chore. They probably wish there were some magical way to conquer the beast. They may not mind the struggle, but they dread the pain (the boredom, perhaps?) that they fear the task involves. They may have come to feel deep inside that spelling will never make sense, regardless of how hard they try.

Good Spelling! attempts to change that attitude. As the good speller knows, accurate spelling need not be painful. Indeed, researchers have discovered that there is a great deal of sense to our spelling system. Just beneath the surface of the hodge-podge of spelling rules and exceptions, our spelling system is highly predictable. (For an excellent discussion of the research, see *Spelling: Structures and Strategies*, by Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna.) The point is that the good speller knows that our system is largely predictable. The poor speller does not. If the poor speller were confident that spelling made some sort of sense most of the time, the job of learning to spell well might seem worth undertaking.

The good speller, then, is really the subject of this program—what he knows, how he looks at words, what relationships he sees. I hope that the unsure, nervous, unconfident speller comes to identify with the good speller.

But herein lies a problem. You will notice that so far I have referred to the good speller as *he*. Why *he*—why not *she*? There is good reason to think that girls are more competent spellers than boys, generally, and my own experience confirms this. On the college level, women students seem to have fewer spelling problems than do men students. The reasons for this are not totally clear, but many people suspect there is a sexual bias involved—that is, society *expects* females to spell better than males, just as traditionally our society has expected boys to play football and girls to do the cheerleading. In the writing of this program, I might have avoided any suspicion of sexual bias by using the plural—“good spellers”—and the pronoun “they.” But I want the reader to identify with an individual, not a group. I might have used “good speller” and the combination “she/he” or “he/she,” but I feel that construction interferes with readability (somewhat like the “and/or” combination), and I have tried very hard to make the text readable. As a result of these problems, I have settled for the conventional “good speller” and the pronoun “he.” While that is not totally satisfying, it seems the best choice here, so long as the reader understands there is no sexual prejudice intended.

Finally, the reader should understand that this program does not pretend to deal with every possible spelling difficulty, nor does it suggest all methods of coping with such difficulties. What it does do is show the person who has never seen any rational system in our spelling that there is a system and, therefore, hope. It teaches those habits, feelings, and understandings that we associate with the good speller.

Richard C. Baggett

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LESSON ONE

The Goals of This Program

- 1 The English language is one of the most difficult to spell. If you have experienced difficulty, you're in good company. For millions of people, the decision whether to add an 's or an s' to a word, or to drop an *e*, or to double an *m* is a bewildering problem. For them, there seems to be almost no system for remembering the complex rules and exceptions that govern English spelling.
- 2 For the winner of spelling contests, however, the challenge of English spelling is easy, because he sees that there is a workable system. He sees that the system is simple, that there is a small number of principles to remember, and that, once he has a firm grasp of those, the exceptions become easier. Ask a good speller how to spell a word and, quite likely, he will begin by saying, "It's simple. . . ."
- 3 The purpose of this program is to explain what the good speller knows that is so simple. After working through the program you should be able to spell most of the words you *need* to spell with confidence, because you will understand the basics of good spelling.

HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- 4 You do not need to know a great deal in order to be a good speller. Once you see how the spelling system operates, you may be surprised at how easy it is. But, before you begin, there is one important question to consider.

- 5 Do you need to know how to spell all the words you speak or read?

- 6 Certainly not. Most high-school students have read the words *zygote* (biology), *axiom* (mathematics), and *Peloponnesian* (history). But how often do they need to *spell* those words? Similarly, a patient returning from the dentist's office may speak of having had *novocaine*, but must he know how to spell the word? Probably not.

- 7 The first understanding a good speller has is that he does not have to know how to spell all the words in the language or even all the words in his vocabulary. Unless he plans to enter a spelling contest, he may never have occasion to spell the word *dithyrambic* since that word is probably not an important one in his career, his hobbies, or even most of his school subjects. Therefore, he does not bother to memorize the spelling.

- 8 The competent speller, then, realizes that there is a limit to the number of words he will ever need to spell. And since that number is relatively small, his task is manageable because he can concentrate on the words he actually finds himself writing time and again. Such words as *its* (or *it's*), *lovable*, and *beginning* are the kinds of words we all need to spell since the chances are quite good that we will write them hundreds of times in various sorts of letters or reports during our lifetime. In addition, key words which are used frequently in our careers, school subjects, and hobbies furnish another group of spellings of which we should be confident. This last group, however, is different for each person. The medical secretary should be able to spell medical terms; the lawyer should be able to spell legal terms; and the mathematician must spell mathematical terms.

HOW TO FOLLOW THIS PROGRAM

- 9 After working through this program you will know the basics of good spelling. You will find the work easy and simple, because there is no need to make it difficult.
- 10 You must allow yourself ten to fifteen minutes a day to work through the lessons. But don't do more than one or two lessons a day. You will find that you achieve much better results if you study spelling in small amounts of time, but frequently. Start studying spelling the right way now. On a piece of paper jot down the days of the week. Is there a fifteen minute period of time everyday when you can have peace and quiet to study? Determine that time now. Be realistic. If that is a time when you might be interrupted by telephone calls, other lessons, or other responsibilities, the time is not good. You can work through this program at any time during the day, but you must work a *few minutes each* day. Decide your schedule now and stick to it.
- 11 Each lesson introduces certain concepts. At the end of the lesson the same concepts are presented in a programed fashion in order to reinforce what you've learned. You must work the program if it is to work for you—that is, you **MUST** write down the answer to each question in your book, even if the answer seems easy and comes quickly to mind. After you have recorded your response, you will find the correct answer in the tinted panel to the left of the item requiring your written response. Of course, it is necessary to cover the answers with a strip of paper or a card until you've recorded your response. After that, you can check immediately to see if you have made an error. If you have, you will find the number of the paragraph in the lesson that contained that information just to the right of the answer. Reread that paragraph before you proceed to the next question. In that way, you will avoid continuing to make the same error. When the questions test your understanding of ideas, your wording may differ slightly from the wording of the answer. However, when the questions test your ability to spell a word, your spelling must be exactly the same as the correct answer.
- 12 You will not find any spelling "rules" as such in this program; neither will you find any "tricks." What you will discover

are the understandings about the formation of English words which help many people spell most of the words they need to spell most of the time. You will still need to check spellings in the dictionary from time to time. And there will be a few words whose spelling will always escape you.

- 13** The next chapter will introduce a basic principle of spelling which is essential to the spelling of thousands of words. But before you continue, answer the questions which follow. Be sure to cover the answer panel before writing your response. Then check yourself. If you get one wrong, reread the paragraph that matches the number beside the answer.

(good) 3

1. The purpose of this book is to explain what the _____ speller knows.

(read; speak) 5

2. You do not need to know how to spell all the words you _____ or _____.

(paragraph)
13

3. If you answer a question incorrectly, you must reread the _____ that contained that information.

(number) 13

4. After each answer you will find the _____ of the paragraph.

(dictionary)
12

5. Even the good speller must occasionally use the _____.

(career; school
subjects;
hobbies) 7, 8

6. It is important to know the spelling of common words. In addition, it is essential to know the spelling of key words in your _____, _____, and _____.

(good spelling)
3, 9

(minutes) 10

(now) 10

7. By the time you finish this program, you should know the basics of _____.
8. In order to make the program work for you, you must spend a few _____ each day on the book.
9. You must decide right _____ what your schedule will be.

SUMMARY

This program attempts to teach you what the good speller knows. It is not necessary to learn to spell all the words you speak or read, just those you write. If you work this program a few minutes each day, you will learn the basic skills which make the spelling of most words easy. You will still, however, find it necessary to use a dictionary from time to time.

LESSON TWO

The Short of It

- 1 The sounds of long vowels are easy to remember, as we shall see in the next chapter. So are the short ones. The following is a list of key words that contain the short sounds of all the vowels. Over each short vowel is the conventional mark to indicate “short sound.”

Key Words

ă as in răt

ě as in pět

ĩ as in kīt

õ as in mōp

ũ as in cūt

- 2 The letter *y* is also a vowel, but we will deal with it later.
- 3 If there are six vowels and each vowel can have two sounds (a short or a long), there must be twelve vowel sounds in English. That’s not true, unfortunately. There are closer to thirty-six vowel sounds in our language. How can that be? Very simply, if we put two vowels together—such as *ou* in *house*—we often get a sound which is neither long nor short, but somewhere in between. But here’s where we’re lucky: these vowel combinations seldom

are the ones that give us trouble when we spell. As a result, many good spellers think of vowel sounds as being either short or long. That way of thinking simplifies spelling for them. So that's what we'll do. We'll consider vowels to be either long or short.

- 4 Why is a vowel short? Why do we say the \tilde{a} in *răt* is short, or the \tilde{e} in *pět*, or the \tilde{i} in *kĭt*? Simply because *there is nothing to make them long*. (If that idea sounds too easy, remember—spelling *can* be difficult if we insist it must be. But what good spellers do is focus on what is easy. By doing that, they can spell most words with confidence.) A vowel starts out being short and stays short unless certain letters are added to make it long.
- 5 Very well, then, words are made up of consonants and vowels. The consonants almost never change their sounds. Neither do the vowels—unless we *make* them change to a long sound. Sounds easy? It is.

(Remember to cover the answers with a sheet of paper before writing your own answers.)

(short) 1

1. The mark \sim over a vowel indicates that it has a _____ sound.

(short) 1, 2

2. The \sim over the *a* in *răt* tells us that the \tilde{a} is _____.

(short) 2

3. The \tilde{u} in *cŭt* is _____.

(long) 4, 5

4. The \tilde{a} in *răt* and the \tilde{u} in *cŭt* are short because there is nothing to make them _____.

(short *i*) 1

5. The \tilde{i} in *kĭt* means _____.

(short) 1

6. If the \tilde{i} in *kĭt* is short, then the \tilde{i} in *hĭt* is _____.

(other letters
are added to
make them
long) 4

7. Short vowels stay short unless _____
_____.

(short; long)
3

8. Vowels can have two sounds: _____ and _____.

(short; long)
3

9. The *ou* in *house*, however, is neither _____ nor
_____.

(vowel) 3

10. There are _____ sounds other than short and long,
but we don't have to worry about them in order to be good
spellers.

(Y) 2

11. *A, E, I, O, U* are vowels. So is _____.

(short; long) 3

12. If *y* can be a vowel, it must have both a _____ and
_____ sound.

(short) 4, 5

13. Unless something *makes* a vowel long, it is _____.

(short; long)
4, 5

14. In the word *ăt*, the *ă* is _____ because nothing has
been added to make it _____.

(consonant) 5

15. Words are made up of vowel sounds and _____
sounds.