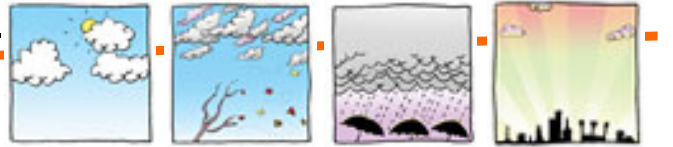


# **four seasons in one day –**

**literacies in changing climates**

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## **English Spelling : More than one way to crack that tough old nut!**

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*"English spelling is impossible!"*  
*"My spelling slows down my writing."*  
*"How can I find words in the dictionary when I can't spell them?"*

Statements such as these led us 5 years ago to start regular spelling workshops at the Diamond Valley Learning Centre. These workshops are available to students who are capable readers, but lack confidence in their writing because of what they see as their 'hopeless' spelling.

The sessions have attracted students from our literacy, VCE & office skills classes and from outside the Centre. They have been set up as skills-building sessions and a pathway to courses in which students can consolidate and build on the skills gained in the workshops.

Students attend the workshops for 2 hours a week for one term, usually 8 weeks. Initially the workshops ran twice a year and Frida Dean and I would teach a one-term course each. This allowed us to share ideas, resources and strategies and gradually refine our approaches. The workshops were and are constantly evolving as we try new materials and strategies, and as we respond to the individual work and study needs of students and to their ongoing evaluation and feedback. Each new course starts from the position of identifying the spelling skills students already possess and those needing revision and learning.

Over the years, we have searched widely for the perfect student workbook, to reduce photocopying and the chaos of handouts in students' folders. We settled on giving students an empty folder with a covering page, and week-by-week adding handouts to it, so in the end it became a spelling book of sorts. We continue to do this, but also purchase for each student *Practical Skills in English* by Judith Hall & Ron King. This clear useful book has reduced our photocopying and complemented our existing program.

What we include in the workshops is generally covered in our literacy classes over a longer period of time, so all of the following approaches and materials could be utilised in any literacy class. Our essential aim in the spelling workshops is very practical - to develop a range of new learning strategies for spelling, an awareness of the patterns and regularities in English and to consolidate this and build confidence by regular writing.

Our aim in the ACAL conference workshop is also practical - to share our approaches, materials and resources in the belief that most practitioners like to come away from a conference with some materials to try in their classes.

We don't plan to give a week-by-week program of activities, but have grouped the activities under headings. Each activity and skill, once introduced, needs to be reinforced and revised over following weeks.

## **1. Start talking about spelling**

Encourage open discussion about spelling. Once some of the myths about English spelling are aired, a robust discussion can dispel some of these and set the direction for a spelling program. Discussion could be initiated in a number of ways:

- **Students' own spelling strategies**

Validate techniques students may already use when they 'get stuck' on a word in their writing. Handout a sheet with a range of options to complete individually and then discuss with a partner and the class. [Handout 1]

*At this early stage of discussion, students may be reassured when told that spelling is not a moral issue - if you spell a word incorrectly you are not a 'bad' speller, a 'bad' person, just someone who hasn't learnt to spell that word yet.*

- **Read a short paragraph with spelling errors in it.**

In pairs and then as a class, students discuss a number of questions: *Did you find this text easy to read? How intelligent or educated do you think the writer is? How important do you consider perfect spelling? How do you feel when someone spots a mistake in your writing? etc*

On the bottom half of the page [which has been folded], look at the diagram that aims to put spelling in perspective, as one part of writing, which in turn is one part of language communication. [Handout 2]

- **Brainstorm feelings and experiences about spelling**

Students think for a minute about what 'spelling' means to them. Brainstorm their comments on the board. Do this quickly without Discussion and when all comments are recorded, discuss each.

[ *The Spelling Pack* – Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit , London 1991]

- **Things people say about spelling**

Cut up a number of typed statements about spelling. In pairs, students sort these under headings –agree, disagree, unsure. This can promote an animated exchange that naturally bubbles into a general discussion.

[ *The Spelling Pack* – Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit , London 1991]

## 2. The origins of English.

Learning about the origins of English can also validate students' difficulties and give them some explanation as to why English causes problems in spelling. This can be a lengthy process and literacy teachers with their interest in English may need to temper their enthusiasm a little. Students may be interested in our spelling history, but will want something practical out of it, so include activities with any information and spread it over a number of weeks.

- **Words more recently English**

On small cards, print words recently absorbed into English eg: patio, hamburger, boomerang etc. In groups, students sort these under their language of origin. Mention that these words are relative newcomers to English and that for hundreds of years before their arrival, English had been changed by the languages and cultures of invading armies.

[Adapted from: *Spelling Works* - M.Hague & C.Harris] [Handout 3]

- **Roman, Greek and French influences on English**

Introduce this on a simple timeline on the board and then look at a more detailed one on a handout. Study a few words that came from these three languages and

write the words derived from them in English. Eg: Latin – *gratus* [thankful] in English becomes *grateful*.

[Adapted from: *Spelling Works* - M.Hague & C.Harris]]

Another good exercise to illustrate the influence of Greek and French is to look at the three pronunciations for *ch*. Use well-known examples such as *chips* [English], *chemist* [Greek], and *machine* [French]. Students can then sort out a range of *ch* words, cut up and in into their three pronunciation groups. [Handout 4]

- From the timeline above, note the arrival of Caxton's printing press in 1477. From this time on our modern spelling system developed, as there was a need for standardisation so everyone could understand what was being printed. As a result, many of our words today are written as they were pronounced 500 years ago. Link this to some work on silent letters, that were once as noisy as the next letter. Eg: knock, wrist, gnaw. Students can find other such words in the dictionary.

[*Spelling Matters* – B.R. Sadler]

### 3. Memory and Learning

Adults having difficulty spelling need to develop new strategies and a personal system for memorising words. It is therefore important to talk about memory and also personal learning styles.

- **A quiz about Memory & Learning.**

Cut up ten statements about memory and learning to be addressed in a later text. In pairs, students decide which are true or false, read the first part of the text *How our brain works* and check their answers. Discuss points of interest or statements not answered in the text. Distribute the second text on *Two Kinds of Memory*, and students check the truth of the remaining statements. [Handout 5]

[Adapted from *The Spelling Pack* - ALBSU London '91]

- **How do you remember?**

The text above can lead into a discussion about how we remember everyday things such as a phone number, the colour of your carpet etc. Then discuss the strategies students use to help them remember the spelling of words. Finally look at ways of systematically revising and remembering. The worksheet on systematic revision is an important reference and the methods suggested need to be practised regularly.

[Handout 6]

- **Learning styles.**

There are a number of different tests that can be used to check individual learning preferences. A more recent one on the web is called the *VARK Questionnaire*. VARK is an acronym for Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing and Kinesthetic. Its questions are short and realistic

and make for a refreshing change from some older versions.

[[www.vark-learn.com](http://www.vark-learn.com)]

#### 4. Handwriting and Spelling

Students who have concerns about spelling, often print rather than write and often in capitals. Early in any literacy class, students need to understand why it is important to avoid writing in capitals. If words are written in capitals **THEY WILL ALL HAVE THE SAME SHAPE** which will make them harder to visualise and learn. Printing separates pen from paper after each letter, minimising the development of the motor memory in the hand. Cursive writing encourages the chunking of letters and the development of this useful memory. [Handout 7]

- **Different styles of handwriting**

Study a number of different handwriting styles and decide which ones would be helpful for spelling. Discuss the importance of handwriting in learning to spell. Talk also about the need to find a pen or pencil which makes writing easier. Have a range of different pens to distribute for students to try. Look also at different kinds of paper and see which is easier to write on.

[Adapted from *The Spelling Pack* – ALBSU]

*Provide a model of modified cursive script for students to use if needed. A summary page of this can be found in any primary school writing book.*

- **Speed Copying**

Following a discussion about the importance of handwriting is a good time to introduce speed copying. Speed copying excuses students from the need to create their own writing, so it is less threatening and its benefits are many. Regular speed copying will improve spelling, handwriting, memory and written expression. Choose a paragraph to copy from a text, and provide a selection of pens and paper for students to try. Practise for 10 minutes. Discuss students' reactions and give out the handout. Encourage students to do speed copying at least four times a week and to experiment with writing tools. [Handout 8]

[Adapted from *Learning to Learn* – R. McCormack & G. Pancini ]

- **Dictation**

Once students have done some speed copying, introduce dictation. If students have been copying a paragraph for a week, they will be confident enough to have it dictated to them. This old-fashioned exercise has fallen from favour, but it is a good way to reinforce the benefits of speed copying and allows students to measure their progress. It can be very satisfying for students to see they have remembered the words they have been practising and alerts them to the words they need to revise.

Introduce dictation with care. The word itself may bring back uncomfortable memories of school testing. Students should be given

the opportunity to copy if they wish. Eventually they will gather confidence and this will be unnecessary.

It may be more suitable to dictate progressively, so that each phrase is written on the board for students to correct as they go, rather than at the end. Less sure students can wait for the words to 'appear' before they write. Regular dictation is useful and encourages students to exercise their memory.

## 5. The importance of regular writing

Students' spelling will only improve if they write regularly. At the end of every class over the 8 weeks of the course, students are set writing homework. This has the double benefit of students practising their spelling skills, and giving the tutor insight into the difficulties students may be having and structure the workshop accordingly. Students are given model texts where appropriate, but as there is no time to develop themes, as there would be in an ongoing class, the topics are fairly open.

Examples of writing tasks are:

- a letter to the tutor after the first class answering the introductory letter she/he has written to them.
- to write about favourite seasons. Use photos or Leunig's 'Summer' cartoon for stimulus.
- a list of 'leading lines' which students may use as a stimulus to write. These can be used at any time and especially if the set task does not appeal. [Handout 9]

[Adapted from *Improve your Spelling* – S. McConnell]

- Write about some of your favourite places to visit in Melbourne. Where do you take tourists when they visit? Use a city map as a stimulus.
- Write a daily journal for a week using a list of adjectives as a summary heading for each day. [Handout 10]

[Adapted from *Writing Matters* – K.Brown & S.Hood]

Student writing is collected at the beginning of each class and corrected over the following week by the tutor. A correction code maybe used if preferred. Students should be encouraged to correct and rewrite their work if necessary and practise any words they may have misspelled.

## 6. The Language of Spelling

In the first session of the workshops we introduce a glossary of terms used when talking about English spelling patterns and rules. Most of the terms are used at some stage over following weeks.

Use the glossary to start to focus on:

- **Vowels and consonants**
  1. Highlight all the vowels in a short text. Discuss which vowel is used most, which words have no vowel in them etc.

2. Notice how important vowels are, by changing *a* to *o* in a list of words. Eg: *paint* becomes *point*
3. Add vowels to categories of words where the vowels have been omitted.  
[From *The Spelling Pack* – ALBSU]
4. To focus more on vowels, consonants and alphabetical order, *The Alphabet Race* attached is a good one to use. [Handout 11]

[Adapted from: *Vocabulary Games & Activities 1* – P.Watcyn-Jones]

- **Syllables**

To help with chunking information for memorising, students need to be able break up longer words. Where to break the word can often be a problem and it is not always appropriate to break words into syllables. Some words have sections that cause natural breaks, such as compound words [doormat, workshop] and words with prefixes and suffixes [unfair, derailed]. Other words however can be broken into syllables and some work may need to be done on this.

## 7. Proofreading

People who spell well have good visual memories. It is very important for students to learn to be able to proofread their work and develop a 'careful eye' and a good visual memory. Suggest that students wait a day before proofreading work, to distance themselves a little from it. For this reason, it is also helpful to ask someone else to check any important writing.

Activities to develop a better visual memory:

- Use two almost identical pictures and give a minute for students in pairs to find the ten small differences between them. Then use two short almost identical texts and individually let students find the differences.
- [ *Spelling Works* - Hague & Harris]
- Regularly give proofreading exercises with short, preferably amusing texts. It is good to create errors in word patterns currently being dealt with in class. [Handout 12]

In our workshops, there is insufficient time to do class work on editing, but while looking at students' writing, the tutor could make individual suggestions for changes regarding paragraphing, form and style.

## 8. Spell checkers, dictionaries and thesauruses

These are tools students need to be able to use routinely and without guilt.

### Dictionary work

- **Initial sounds**

Often students get frustrated looking words up in a dictionary when they don't know the first three letters. A reference sheet giving alternative ways of writing initial sounds may be helpful. Each student can use the dictionary to complete the grid or alternatively, do it as a class activity allocating a number of initial sounds for each student to check and then spell out to the group. [Handout 13]

[Adapted from : *Dictionary Power* - E.Hamilton]

- **Word finding skills**

Students may also need some work to speed up their word finding skills, such as:

1. Regular brief practise in alphabetical order, such as ordering six words on the board at the beginning of every class.
2. Games such as the alphabet race mentioned earlier and other activities such as those in *Dictionary Power*.

### Spellcheckers

- Make available a range of commercially available spellcheckers and discuss the usability of each. Look at dictionaries and thesauruses in the same way. Discourage students from rushing out and buying a book immediately, but to use the ones in class to find which suit best.
- Encourage students to start a personal spellchecker in a pocket sized alphabetical address book in which to write the words they need in their everyday writing.
- *Quick word* [Hawker Brownlow ] can be also used for this purpose. It includes 1,199 high-use writing words and provides space for students to list their own. It has a good section on homophones and useful word lists at the back. Although its A4 format makes it too large for a pocket, it fits well into a folder and is attractively cheap- \$2 a copy.
- Discuss the advantages and shortcomings of the spellchecker on the computer, especially when doing work on homophones.

### Thesaurus

Using a thesaurus is a good way for students to broaden written vocabulary and stretch spelling knowledge. There is rarely time to cover the use of the thesaurus in our workshops, but simple substitution exercises such as the one attached are useful in a more general class.

[Handout 14]

## 9. Patterns and Rules

It can be argued that English spelling is 80% regular. Elsie Smelt, in *Speak Spell and Read English*, argues strongly that 'English spelling is much more orderly and regular than most of us are led to believe'. Nevertheless there are a large number of patterns and rules and what to cover in class depends on the students' needs revealed in their writing.

- **The difference between the sounds of the long and short vowels** must be covered and illustrated in easily remembered words.  
Eg: Short a in *ant*, long a [the letter name] in *mate*.
- **'Walking vowel rule'** 'When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking'

This is the most important rule to be covered. An understanding of this rule will help with the adding of suffixes. Although the jingle is a little in the primary school vein, most students find it a useful way to remember



that the long vowel sound is made when two vowels are together as in *soap* or when there is a single consonant between them as in *made*. An exercise that looks at the three main ways of writing the long vowel **a** is a good way to practise this rule. [Handout 15]

- **Lone vowels**

The next most important rule is that lone vowels usually say their short sound. It's useful to look at the short and long vowel patterns together in a range of activities such as sorting words according to the length of their vowel sounds, mazes & grids. With mazes, students can work in pairs following the chosen pattern through the maze and when finished, write all words on their maze path and add suffixes.

*Practical Spelling Skills* by J. Hall & R.King has many exercises that practise the above rules. Once students are clear about the short and long vowels and the 'walking vowel' rule, it is easy to add suffixes and to understand why the silent e is dropped and the final consonant doubled.

Work on vowels is critical as vowels cause most problems in spelling. It could be somewhat depressing for students to be told that, although there are 5 true vowels, there are more than 24 ways of writing vowel sounds in English. It is useful nevertheless, for teachers to be aware of this and sensitive of the need to do considerable work on them.

- **The consonant Y as a vowel**

The most important alternative vowel is the consonant y. Draw a distinction between single syllable words where y sounds like a long i sound and most longer words, where y sounds like a long e. However the rule for adding suffixes in both cases is the same. Students need to be careful when there is a consonant before the y. To sharpen students' eyes, use mazes and sorting words into groups noting if there is a vowel or a consonant before the y. It's easier for students to remember two words they know well - the saying : 'Boys are OK, but babies need changing' may be a helpful memory tool. This focuses on two easily remembered words, and by using 'changing' rather than 'dropping', the y is less likely to disappear in the process.

- **Schwa sound**

ESL students will usually have no difficulty identifying this neutral unstressed and most frequently occurring vowel sound in English.

With native speakers, however, it is helpful to do some work on it, as this sound can be represented by any one of the vowels. Difficulties with the schwa emphasise the need to develop a good visual memory and also to learn what the most likely choices are when this sound is heard, or not heard. A good introduction to this is by looking at the final unstressed vowel at the end of many two-syllable words such as farmer, doctor, collar & colour. [Handout 16]

- **Base words - Prefixes and suffixes**

Students will benefit from breaking the longer and more regular Latin and Greek origin words into prefix + base + suffix. Choose suitable words from the texts you are using. After work has been done on

suffixes, it is useful to develop some understanding of the variety and meanings of prefixes. Negative prefixes are particularly important as often their addition to a word can cause confusion about doubling.

- **Plurals**

Generally speaking plurals are not a big problem once the y words have been covered, and when you make clear that words with a *hissing* sound at the end add es. Eg: dress, dish, match, box, waltz. [Such words cannot be comfortably pronounced without the e when pluralised.] This leaves more irregular plurals such as words ending in o [piano, tomato], f and fe [wife, roof], words that change their spelling [child, mouse] and those which don't change at all [sheep, deer]. It's not helpful to do a lot of different plurals at once, but better to deal with them in groups as they arise.

- **Hard and soft g and c**

If students are competent readers, they usually understand this rule without being aware of it. However, it is good to focus on it when adding suffixes to words that end with a soft c or g. eg: change + able, manage + able. Start by sorting words into groups according to their sound and then practise with the worksheet. This exercise is useful as it explains why the **e** is kept, but generally it is better for students to develop a visual memory of the words they are likely to need. [Handout 17]

- **i before e**

Most students will remember the rhyme, "i before e, except after c", but they will have already come across a number of exceptions to this rule in words such as weight, their etc. Once again it is important to develop a visual memory with these words, but the exercise on the next handout can lead students to add a useful extension to the old rhyme. [Handout 18] [Adapted from: *A Basic Course in English* - by W. Wright ]

- **Homophones**

Homophones can be confusing, but it is best to only treat them as they arise. There are a few perennial ones confused and one way to deal with these is by process of elimination. For example:

**two, too & to** Check:

1. Is it number 2 ? [two]
2. If not, does it mean *very* or *as well*? [too]
3. If not, it must be to.

*It's also important to notice the difference in sound between too and to.*

The pages at the back of *Quickword* are a good reference.

- **Apostrophes**

Apostrophes may be small, but can cause much confusion and there is usually at least one student who will trip over these. It's easier to treat them as they arise in texts, focusing on the apostrophe of omission first, and then the apostrophe of possession. Try to keep examples as simple and clear as possible and drawn from students' writing.

## 10. Miscellaneous Lists & games

- The 100 most used words – a very reassuring list for students to realise they have mastered half of the words they mostly use in their writing.
- Fun with words – word finds, grids, mazes. A number of these to be distributed in the workshop. ESL Games books can be a source of these.

Finally, learning to spell is very individual, so pair or small group games and exercises are preferable where students are active most of the time. It is also important that students have fun with words as they build their confidence, skills and understanding of English spelling. What we have outlined here is by no means a complete list of what to cover in a spelling program, but merely the basis for one. All spelling programs must be structured to meet the particular needs of the students in each class.

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