

SPELLING RULES — O.K.

By

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Drawings by Catherine Chew

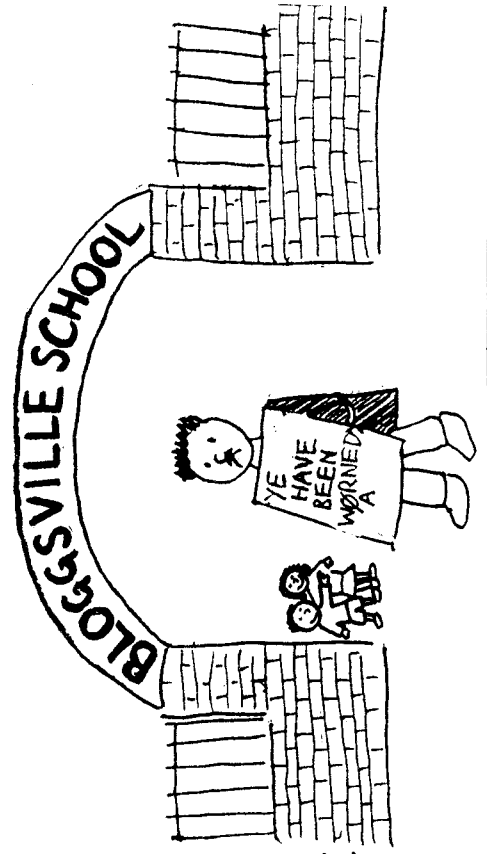
Here are some misspellings which quite often appear in the work of students of GCSE age, but which could be avoided if the students knew a few simple rules:

definite
beginning
referred
occurring
criticism
sequence

completely
commitment
disappear
relieve
advertisement
tried

And have you ever wondered why 'forgetful' has only one 't' but 'forgetting' has two? Or why 'hopeful' keeps its 'e' but 'hoping' does not? Or why the plural of 'donkey' is 'donkeys' but the plural of 'pony' is 'ponies'? Or why so many words (for example, 'foreign', 'vein' and 'efficient') seem to break the 'i' before 'e' except after 'c' rule? All these problems can be cleared up, however, if you know the rules properly. English spelling is not nearly as chaotic as some people want us to believe.

From 1992, poor spelling will be penalised in GCSE exams. There is nothing unfair about this, provided that there has been advance warning and provided that children have been taught the principles of good spelling. There *has* been advance warning (we knew nearly two years ago that exam boards were being asked to tighten up on spelling standards) and schools should have adjusted their teaching accordingly. Not all teachers have themselves been trained in the best methods, however, and many students may still feel insecure as they approach GCSE. Spelling really needs to be taught properly from primary school, and it is to be hoped that the National Curriculum will eventually



ensure that it is. This pamphlet cannot do the work which should continue throughout a child's compulsory education, but it can provide simple and sensible first aid for students approaching GCSE. The guidelines, based on observation of real students of GCSE age and the types of mistakes that they make, have been chosen to cover as many examples as possible in the most economical way.

The 'i' before 'e' except after 'c' rule, the only one in most people's repertoire, is a particularly useless one. It will nevertheless be dealt with, but only after some more useful guidelines have been covered. Good spelling is partly a matter of understanding some general logical principles and partly a matter of devising personal strategies which may have little basis in logic but which can nevertheless be extremely useful if they work.

1. PHONETIC SPELLING

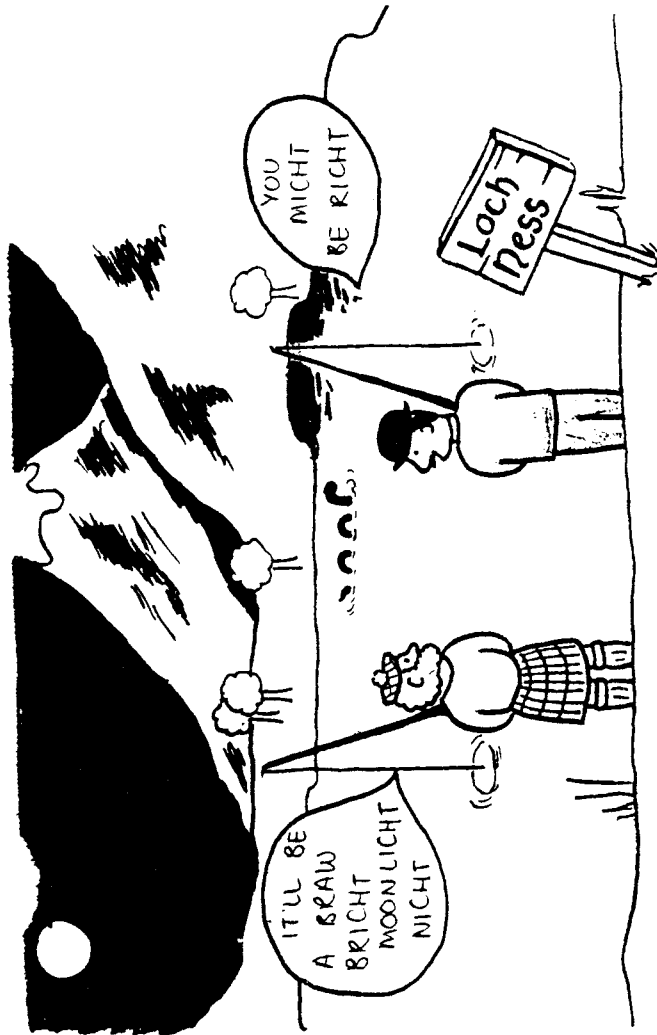
Frank Smith, the influential but misguided literacy 'guru', says that the poorest spellers spell phonetically — that is, they spell words as they sound. This is no longer as true as it might once have been. Generations of children brought up on the 'look-and-say' approach to reading (learning whole words rather than how to build words up from separate sounds) have not developed the habit of listening carefully to the sounds in words. As a result, many now spell quite illogically. Youngsters of 16 and 17 will produce monsters like 'potliacn' or 'polytin' for 'politician', 'maritaly' for 'materially', 'gussed' for 'guest' and 'exarete' for 'exaggerate'.

The first step towards good spelling is to listen carefully to the sounds in a word and the order in which they come. I once taught a badly dyslexic boy who had been trained from early on to do this. He spelt many words incorrectly, but most were recognisable because they were quite logical. His version of 'politician' was 'poltitishon', which was a good deal more sensible than 'potliacn' or 'polytin', and would, I suspect, be less irritating to an examiner. English spelling is not as wildly irregular as it is often made out to be, and parts of words, at least, will be correct if they are spelt as they sound.

Phonetic spelling can be even more reliable if people train themselves to become Secret Silent Letter Stressers, mentally emphasising letters which are not sounded, or are only vaguely sounded, in normal pronunciation. A word like 'fascinating', for example, can be thought of with the 'c' sounded as a

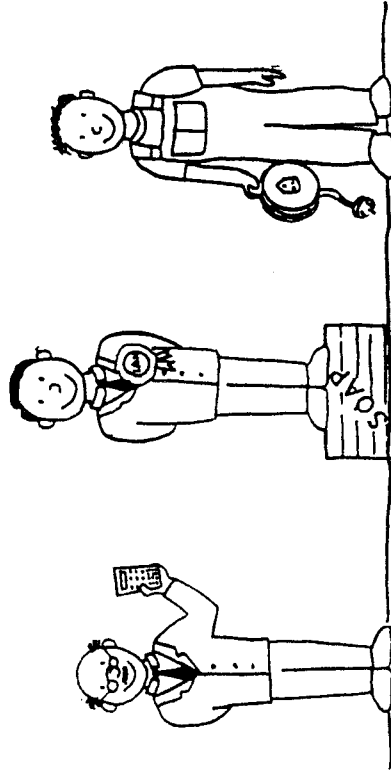
'k'. 'Definite', which many people want to spell 'definate', can be pronounced mentally to rhyme with 'bite'. Words like 'gnome', 'knife', 'night' and 'debt' can be mentally pronounced with the 'g', 'k', 'gh' and 'b' sounded. If you are Scottish, you may already feel quite at home with 'nicht' and 'bricht' — if a Sassenach Silent Letter Stresser crosses the border, he will begin to feel quite like one of the natives, at least in one respect!

What other words can you think of where stressing silent letters may be a help with spelling?



2. BREAKING WORDS UP

Bad spellers can also help themselves by breaking words up into manageable chunks. If 'politician' causes problems, it can be thought of as 'politic lan'. Similar examples are 'tactic lan', 'statistic lan', 'mathematic lan' and 'electric lan', where the 'sh' sound of the 'c' may be a problem if a poor speller tries to cope with the whole word at once. 'Politic', 'tactic', 'statistic', 'mathematic' and 'electric' are phonetically regular, and so is lan, whose name, once learnt, can be used in dozens of other words besides these. 'Criticism', in the list at the beginning of this pamphlet, should be thought of as 'critic' + 'ism'; 'fanaticism' is 'fanatic' (nice and phonetic!) + 'ism'.



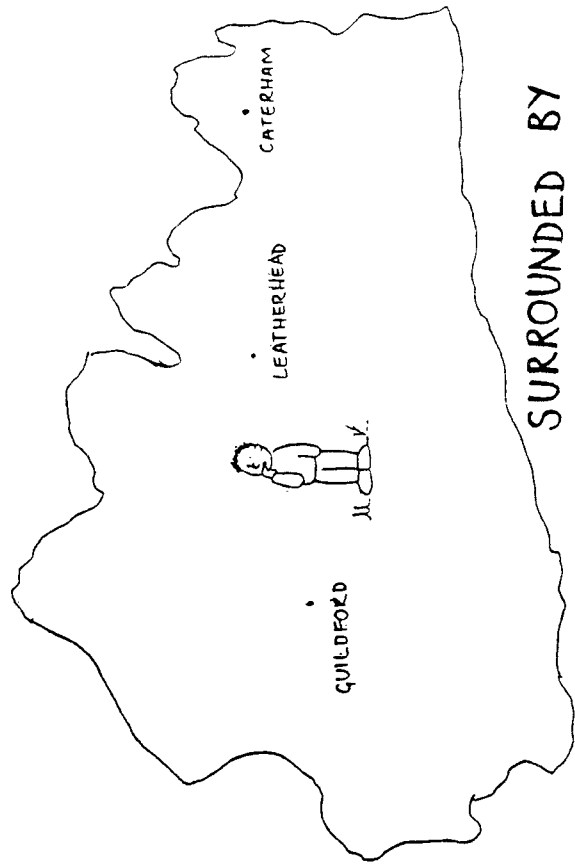
Mathematic lan Politic lan Electric lan

This approach also has the advantage of drawing attention to the structure of words and the relationships between them, thus assisting comprehension as well as spelling. In a recent test, 67% of students studying English at A Level claimed not to know the meaning of 'erroneous' — but all knew 'error' and would probably have understood 'erroneous' and had a better chance of spelling it correctly if they had been trained to see connections. Many students now seem to think that each word has to be learnt as a separate entity, and spelling can be made very much easier for them if they think of words in families. 'Definite', an example already given, is, of course, part of the same family as 'finite' and 'definition', where the 'i' after the 'n' is clearly pronounced and could not possibly be mistaken for any other vowel. An interesting word to try on poor spellers to show them how they can help

themselves is 'conscience': most of them are daunted by it, but many can spell 'science' and are amazed to find that the two words are related in meaning (both have to do with knowledge) and that the simple addition of 'con' to 'science' gives the correct spelling of 'conscience'.

The breaking into chunks may be gimmicky at times, but that doesn't matter as long as the gimmick works for the individual. One dyslexic told me that he could never remember whether to put 'ie' or 'ei' in 'friend' until he began to think of it as two syllables: 'fri' (pronounced 'fry') and 'end'. Another would regularly write 'seround' for 'surround'. As she could spell 'Surrey', the name of the county in which she lived, I suggested that she should think of herself as 'surrounded by Surrey', which would give her the bit of 'surround' with which she had problems — it worked! Someone else could not remember whether to write 'the school principle' or 'the school principal' until we thought of the sentence 'make a pal of the principal'. Such devices can be very personal and need have no logic about them — the main thing is that they work.

Think about words whose spelling is a problem for you personally, and see whether you can devise gimmicks to enable you to remember them.



3. HELP WITH UNCLEAR VOWELS FROM RELATED WORDS WHERE THE VOWELS ARE MORE CLEARLY PRONOUNCED

Unstressed vowel sounds can present spelling problems, as there may be several possible ways of spelling them. Think, for example, of the last syllables of 'substance' and 'essence': how can one know whether to put an 'a' or an 'e' before the 'nce'? The best help, here, is offered by related words in which the vowel sound is clearly pronounced — for example, 'substantial' and 'essential'. There may not always be a suitable related word, but if there is, it is a reliable guide to spelling. Further examples are 'occupant' ('occupation'), 'resident' ('residential'), 'advertisement' ('advertise'), 'adaptable' ('adaptation'), 'competition' ('compete'), and, of course, 'definite' ('definition'). 'Sequence', from the list at the beginning of the pamphlet, should be thought of as a near-relation of 'sequential'. Once again, we are using the sounds of words as a guide to spelling.

Now try applying that guideline to the following words, each of which has a vowel left out. In each case, find a closely related word in which the vowel sound is more clearly pronounced:

prud-*n*ce, observ-*n*ce, irrit-*n*t, incl-*n*ation, transcend-*n*ce, commend-*n*ble, emi-*n*gr-*n*t, consequ-*n*ce, affirm-*n*tive, radi-*n*t, prep-*n*ation, profess-*n*r, simil-*n*r, hyp-*n*crite, democr-*n*cy, environ-*n*ment, prefer-*n*ce, tyr-*n*t, friv-*n*lous.

4. THREE VERY USEFUL RULES

The three most useful spelling rules for anyone who has got past the stage of matching letters to sounds are what I call the 'drop, swap and double' rules. They all apply to the procedure of adding suffixes (endings) to existing words. Again, the habit of breaking words up into manageable chunks is a useful one to cultivate — why worry about trying to cope with 'fortunately' as a whole when you can do it as 'fortune' + 'ate' + 'ly', applying appropriate rules as each addition is made? It is worth remembering that the only letter which may be affected by the addition of a suffix is the last letter of the base word (i.e. the word to which the ending is being added), and it is quite possible that no change at all may be necessary.

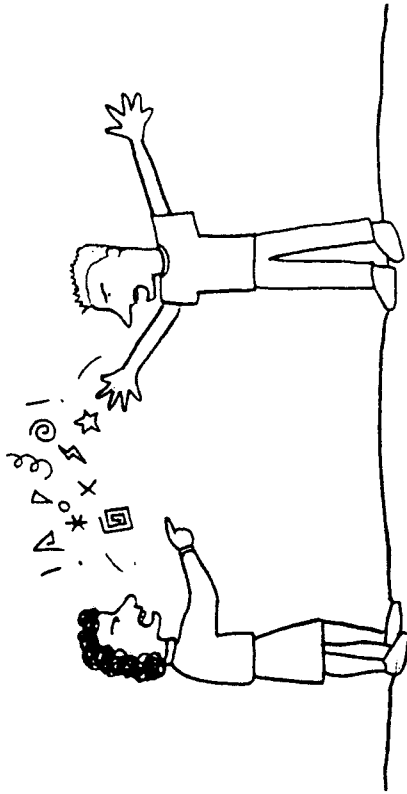
So when do we drop, swap and double? Each of these procedures applies to a particular group of words: dropping applies to words ending in silent 'e', swapping to words ending in 'y' and doubling to words ending in a single consonant. Words ending in any other way will undergo no change when suffixes are being added.

DROP a silent 'e' at the end of a word if the suffix being added begins with a vowel. 'Hope' + 'ing' becomes 'hoping', 'complete' + 'ion' becomes 'completion', 'advertise' + 'ed' becomes 'advertised'. It may look, in the last example, as though the silent 'e' has been retained, but the 'e' before the 'd' belongs to the past tense ending, as would be the case in 'started'. For the purposes of this rule, the suffix 'y' counts as a vowel, because it is pronounced like an 'e' — 'haste' + 'y' becomes 'hasty'.

Do not drop the silent 'e' if the ending to be added begins with a consonant. 'Completeness' and 'advertisement' from the misspelt words list can now be corrected: the base words are 'complete' and 'advertise', and they keep the silent 'e' before the addition of the suffixes 'ly' and 'ment' as these suffixes begin with consonants.

'Peaceable', 'noticeable', 'changeable', 'outrageous', 'manageable' and a few others with 'c' and 'g' before the silent 'e' of the base word may seem to break this rule, but they are actually obeying a 'higher' rule which says that 'c' and 'g' need an 'e', 'i' or 'y' after them if they are to keep their 's' and 'j' ('soft') pronunciations.

'Wholly', 'duly', 'truly', 'awful' and 'argument' are genuine exceptions: they should, according to the rule, retain the silent 'e'; but they do not.



A TRULY AWFUL ARGUMENT

When adding the adverbial 'ly' ending to an adjective ending in 'le', drop the 'le' completely — 'gentle' becomes 'gently', not 'gentlely'. This should not cause problems, as 'gently' is spelt exactly as it sounds.

Now try linking the following base words and endings, dropping or retaining

the silent 'e' as necessary:

like + ly, separate + ed, hate + ful, fortune + ate, compare + ing, refine + ment, describe + ed, late + est, late + ness, courage + ous (careful!), separate + ion, declare + ation, unreasonable + ly, shape + y, stone + y, fate + al, package + ing, advantage + ous, replace + ment, replace + ing.

SWOP (which can also be spelt 'swap'!) a 'y' at the end of a base word for an 'i', if the 'y' has a consonant in front of it. It doesn't matter whether the suffix to be added begins with a vowel or a consonant — it is the 'consonant + y' ending of the base word which tells you to change 'y' to 'i'. 'Happy' + 'er' becomes 'happier', 'happy' + 'ness' becomes 'happiness', 'pity' + 'ed' becomes 'pitied', 'pity' + 'ful' becomes 'pitiful'. This explains why the past tense of 'try' is 'tried', and why the plural of 'pony' is 'ponies'. Break this rule if applying it would result in double 'i' — 'carry' + 'ing' cannot be 'carring', so it must be 'carrying'.

If the letter before the 'y' is a vowel, do not change the 'y' to an 'i', but simply add the suffix to the word as it stands — 'enjoy' + 'ment' becomes 'enjoyment', 'play' + 'ing' becomes 'playing', and 'donkey' + 's' becomes 'donkeys'. 'Daily', ('day' + 'ly'), 'gaily' ('gay' + 'ly'), and 'said' ('say' + 'ed') are exceptions.

In 'quy' endings, the 'u' counts as part of the consonant 'q' and not as a vowel — the plural of 'soliloquy' is 'soliloquies'.

Now try linking the following base words and endings, swopping 'i' for 'y' where necessary:

try + ed, cry + ing, mercy + ful, monkey + s, easy + er, merry + ment, display + ed, marry + age, lazy + ness, happy + est, hurry + ing, valley + s, copy + ist, copy + er, necessary + ly, deploy + ment, cry + ed, friendly + est, stately + ness, deny + al.

DOUBLE a single consonant at the end of a base word when adding a suffix beginning with a vowel, but only if the consonant has a single vowel before it and comes at the end of a stressed syllable. This is a slightly more complicated rule, but only because there are more things to check — whether the suffix begins with a vowel, whether the syllable before the suffix is stressed, and whether that syllable ends with a single consonant preceded by a single vowel. If any of these conditions does not apply, then the question of doubling the consonant does not arise.

According to this rule, 'stop' + 'ed' becomes 'stopped', 'begin' + 'ing' becomes 'beginning' ('gin' is a stressed syllable), 'forgot' + 'en' becomes 'forgotten' ('got' is stressed), 'occur' + 'ing' becomes 'occurring' ('cur' is stressed).

DO NOT DOUBLE a final consonant if it has two vowels before it ('mean' + 'ing' becomes 'meaning', and 'seem' + 'ed' becomes 'seemed'), or if there are already two consonants at the end of the syllable, or if the syllable is unstressed ('benefit', a frequent cause of problems, gives 'benefited' and 'benefiting', because the main stress in the word is on 'ben', not on 'fit'). And do not double the last consonant of the base word if the suffix begins with a consonant (which is why 'commitment' should have only one 't' before the 'ment').

Watch out for base words ending in 'fer', where the stress can move according to the suffix being added; 'refer' + 'ed' becomes 'referred' because 'fer' remains the stressed syllable, but 'refer' + 'ence' becomes 'reference', because the stress has moved to 'ref', and the syllable to which the suffix is being added is no longer stressed.

Words ending in a single 'l' form a little group of exceptions in English (but not in American) spelling. In English spelling, a single 'l' at the end of a base word tends to be doubled before a suffix beginning with a vowel, even if the syllable ending with the 'l' is not stressed — hence 'traveller', 'panelling' and 'gambolled'. The Americans are more logical, and spell these words with only one 'l'.

Now try linking the following base words and endings, doubling the final consonant of the base word where necessary:

cut + ing, prefer + ed, prefer + ence, fit + ness, transmit + er, commit + ment, patrol + ed, submit + ed, abandon + ing, channel + ed, commit + ee, harden + ed, compel + ing, propel + or, neat + en, smart + est, label + ed, annul + ing, entertain + ed, undertake + er.

5. PREFIXES

Prefixes are groups of letters like 'in', 'un', 'dis' and 'mis' which are added to the beginnings of words. They are usually added directly to the base word without any change being made. 'Disappear' is simply 'appear' with 'dis' added to it. In words like 'dissatisfied' and 'misspelt' it may look as though the 's' has been doubled, but it has not — one 's' belongs to the prefix and one is the first letter of the base word. In the same way, the double 'n' in 'unnatural' and 'unnerving' results from the fact that the prefix ends with an 'n' and the base word begins with an 'n'.

Now try linking the following prefixes and base words:

mis + inform, dis + service, un + ending, mis + spent, un + named, dis + believe, mis + trust, in + convenient, inter + act, inter + related, in + substantial, over + rated, over + heated, inter + continental, dis + enchanted, mis + time, mis + apprehension, un + believable, un + noticed, in + explicable.

6. 'I' BEFORE 'E' EXCEPT AFTER 'C'

As this is the only spelling rule that most people know, it had better be mentioned — but it is not a useful rule!

If this rule is taken in the simple form in which most people know it, as above, the exceptions far outnumber the words which obey the rule. Strictly speaking, however, it applies only to words in which the 'ie' or 'ei' combination rhymes clearly with 'ee'. Don't worry if you didn't know that — at least one well-known professor of education has shown ignorance of this rule in print! There are dozens of words in which 'ie' sounds like 'ee' ('brief', 'chief', 'diesel', 'fiend', 'grief', etc) but the 'ei' words are so few in number that one might as well learn them as a group and forget the rule. Four of them end in 'ceive' ('conceive', 'deceive', 'perceive' and 'receive'), a further three are close relations of those four ('conceit', 'deceit' and 'receipt'), and one is a 'loner' — 'ceiling'.

For anyone who feels that all self-respecting rules require a few exceptions, 'seize', 'counterfeit', 'protein' and 'caffeine' may be regarded as genuine exceptions — although some would argue that the 'ei' in 'protein' and 'caffeine' should be pronounced as two separate sounds.

The 'i' before 'e' rule was never intended to cover the following groups, and they are therefore not genuine exceptions:

Words in which the 'ei' rhymes with 'eye' — for example, 'either' and 'neither'.

ther', both of which are correctly pronounced with an initial long 'i' rather than long 'e' sound, and 'height';

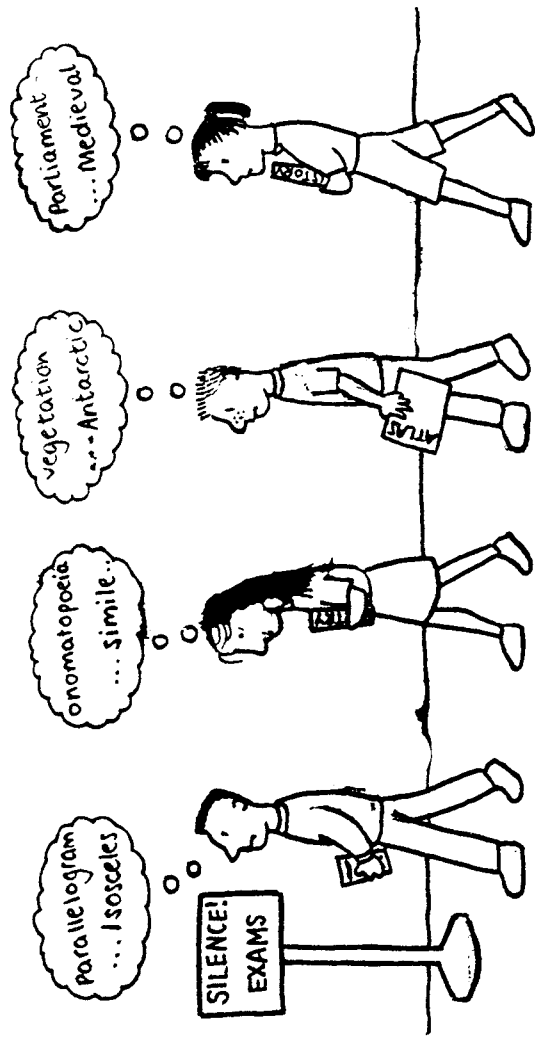
Words in which the 'ei' rhymes with 'bay' — for example, 'rein', 'reign', 'vein', 'deign', 'neigh', 'sleigh', 'weigh';

Words in which 'eir' rhymes with 'air' or 'ear' — for example, 'their', 'heir', 'weird', 'weir';

Words in which the 'ei' or 'ie' represents an indefinite vowel sound — for example, 'foreign', 'forfeit', 'surfeit', 'conscience', 'efficient' and 'ancient'.

7. SUBJECT-SPECIFIC WORDS

Where GCSE is concerned, it is important that students know how to spell words likely to be needed in the subjects that they are taking. It is silly to go into an exam knowing that one is going to have to use certain words but not knowing how to spell them. Students should also look for opportunities to get help from exam question papers, which may contain much of the necessary vocabulary.



SPELLING HELP FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

For spelling help for younger children, see the following:

Hornsby, B. and Shear, F., 1974. *Alpha to Omega*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational

MacDonald, T.H., 1984. *First Aid in Reading, Writing and Spelling*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger

McNee, M., 1991. *Step by Step*. East Dereham: M. McNee (available at four pounds, including postage and packing, from 2 The Crescent, Toftwood, East Dereham, Norfolk NR19 1NR)

Games and other materials are also available from Mona McNee.