

Spelling

By Malkin Dare

The words in the right-hand column can be used to determine the approximate grade level at which students are spelling. Dictate the words one by one, providing a sentence for each word but no other clues, until the student has spelled four words wrong in a row. Count the number right and use the chart below to determine the approximate grade level. This test format was used in the early 1920's, and so the results will reflect achievement comparable to that time. One might expect that today's students will score lower.

	Results at mid-school-year								
Grade Level	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Words Correct	11	18	24	30	35	39	42	44	

With permission from Paul B. Hinds, *Reading: The First Domino*

If your student tests out below grade level, you may wish to work on spelling with him at home. Since many school systems play down the importance of correct spelling until senior high school (when the boom is lowered with no warning), it may prove quite difficult to convince your student of its importance

It is true that correct spelling is beside the point in Internet chatrooms or when handing in assignments to teachers who don't deduct marks for spelling errors. Nevertheless, correct spelling turns out to be very important for such things as university essays, computer instructions, and job applications. Furthermore, a good speller has an edge when it comes to written fluency.

In teaching spelling, it is important to keep two basic principles in mind. The first principle is that the goal should be to spell everything correctly the first time, as opposed to setting down the meaning hastily and then going back to edit afterwards. This means that students have to learn spellings to the point of automaticity — leaving them free to devote 100% of their brain power to the content of what they are writing. As long as students are unsure of a word's spelling, they will be forced to squander some of their precious mental desk space on mechanical details.

Words that have been learned for spelling dictation have not necessarily been learned to automaticity. Often, the word that was reproduced beautifully on Friday morning's spelling dictation will turn up misspelled on Friday afternoon's composition. This is an indication that more teaching and practice is needed.

The second basic principle is the importance of immediate feedback. Every time a student writes something, he should be required to correct his mistakes right away — as soon as the word has been written, if possible. Prompt feedback is the most powerful teaching tool there is.

There are many good workbooks for teaching spelling. I usually recommend the Hayes workbooks: *Spelling Skills & Drills, Grades 1 to 8*, available from Artel Educational Resources Ltd., 800-665-9255. Start with the workbook one grade BELOW your student's tested level. At only about \$5.00 each, these workbooks are a bargain.

The Hayes workbooks follow an orderly progression and help to provide Velcro in students' brains to give the correct spelling something to stick to. The workbooks teach such things as word patterns, roots, pronunciation, and homonyms. One minor problem with the Hayes workbooks is that they sometimes require students to correct deliberate misspellings. Since this is counter-productive (we should always be reinforcing the correct spelling), these exercises should be skipped.

Spelling improvement is a long-term project, but it definitely pays off in the end.

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Dictation Words

1. can
2. top
3. good
4. six
5. make
6. belong
7. soft
8. that
9. sick
10. alike
11. card
12. stay
13. easy
14. track
15. able
16. point
17. collect
18. picture
19. bridge
20. carry
21. aboard
22. objection
23. address
24. vacation
25. importance
26. arrange
27. perhaps
28. search
29. publication
30. treasure
31. total
32. examination
33. really
34. invitation
35. minute
36. relief
37. expense
38. apparent
39. evidence
40. secretary
41. sincerely
42. bicycle
43. committee
44. employees
45. perceived
46. orchestra
47. enthusiasm
48. acquaintance
49. privilege
50. proficiency