Why is English spelling so tricky?
In English, spelling and pronunciation don't match. Reasons are historical, geographical and socio-political. All of this can make spelling without a spell-checker very challenging!

**Spelling patterns can help**
While there are many baffling aspects of spelling (why, for example, are ‘though’ and ‘tough’ spelt so similarly?), there are, however, a few useful spelling patterns that can help us guess the way something is spelled (or spelt – both are correct). These are:

- **Use i before e except after c.**
- **Use silent e to make sounds long.**
- **Use double consonants to keep sounds short.**
- **Change y to i and add es and ed.**

**Use i before e except after c**
There’s an old rhyme that helps us remember to write *thief* with *ie* and *ceiling* with *ei*. It goes like this:

- Use *i* before *e*
- Except after *c*
- And in words that sound *ay*
- Like *neighbour* and *weigh*.

This works most of the time:

**Use silent e to make sounds long**
We can think of vowels (*a, e, i, o and u*) as short (e.g. the *i* in *bit*) or long (e.g. the *i* in *bite*), depending on the time they take to say. Adding an extra vowel (e.g. silent *e*) after a consonant lengthens the sound.

**Double consonants to keep sounds short**
You might have wondered why words sometimes change their spelling when word endings like *en*, *ed* and *ing* are added. We can keep a single vowel sound short when it is followed by a consonant-vowel by adding an extra consonant, like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short sounds</th>
<th>Long sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vowel-consonant</td>
<td>Vowel-cc-vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writ</td>
<td>written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plan</td>
<td>planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hop</td>
<td>hopping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This principle generally applies to stressed (emphasised) syllables rather than unstressed syllables. Hence we have two *ns* in *penned* (a single stressed syllable) but only one *n* in *opened* (where *o* receives the stress).

**Change y to i and add es and ed**
When we have a consonant plus *y* at the end of words (e.g. *steady*), we change the *y* to *i* and add *es* (e.g. *steadies*) and *ed* (e.g. *steadied*) to change the form of the word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>es endings</th>
<th>ed endings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>party</td>
<td>parties</td>
<td>partied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>study</td>
<td>studies</td>
<td>studied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worry</td>
<td>worries</td>
<td>worried</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This pattern doesn’t apply when a vowel comes before the *y* (consider *plays* and *played*), but it generally applies otherwise.

**Add es after o and for an extra sound**
There are other words that add *es* when they change form. Words that end in *o* (e.g. *go*) typically add *es* (e.g. *goes*). So too do words where it would be too difficult to pronounce the final *s* without an extra syllable. The *es* signals this extra sound:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finish</td>
<td>finishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fix</td>
<td>fixes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glass</td>
<td>glasses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Be careful with commonly confused words!
It’s easy to confuse words that have different spellings and meanings, but identical or almost identical sounds. The only way to avoid confusion is to learn them by heart (or is that by hart?). Examples include:

**Accept/except** – If we accept (agree) that plagiarism is wrong, we will reference all ideas except (excluding) our own.

**Adapt/adopt** – Many students find that they have to adopt (take on) new ways of thinking in order to adapt to (adjust to) university study.

**Affect/effect** – Researchers are studying how we affect (influence) the environment and to what extent this is causing effects (results) such as climate change.

**Assure/ensure/insure** – The company assured (reassured) them that it had ensured (made sure) that the car was insured (secured against damages or theft).

**Compliment/complement** – He complimented (praised) their choices of house and roof colour, saying these complemented (suited) one another.

**i.e./e.g.** – She wanted to study business, i.e. (that is) commerce, and to take practical units, e.g. (for example) marketing (note that i.e. and e.g. are informal).

**It’s/its** – Because the university has changed its (the ones belonging to it) courses, it’s (it is) much easier to study a broad range of units.

**Principal/principle** – The principal (main) law of evolution is the principle (general rule) that only the fit-test survive.

**Cite/site/sight** – They cited (referred to) *Lonely Planet*, indicating that sites (places) in Australia’s southwest had been recognised as the most magnificent sights (views) to see worldwide.

**Their/they’re/there** – Although they initially lost their (pertaining to them) way, they managed to get back on track, and now they’re (they are) almost there (at that place).

**Five fun ways to improve your spelling**
1. Get a spelling journal and note the spelling of five new words every day. Test yourself or get a friend to test you regularly.
2. Write tricky words on sticky notes. Stick these in different places around the house. Practise spelling these words whenever you get to these places.
3. Make up fun ways of remembering the spelling of words that you have difficulty with, e.g. broccoli has a lot of vitamin C, therefore it needs two cs.
4. Do crossword puzzles.
5. Play word games such as Scrabble, Boggle and Hangman.

Got ideas of other fun ways to improve spelling? Send them to us so we can share them with other students: study.smarter@uwa.edu.au

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