

Activities for Practising Spelling – Toxic to Helpful

Based on many years researching and practising spelling activities with struggling students, **Lyn Stone's** forthright suggestions about what really works, and maybe more importantly what doesn't, will provoke lively debate amongst those trying to help children to become better spellers.

Fluent, accurate writing is an apex activity. It is one of the most complicated things a person can do. It requires the creation and use of brain structures available only to humans, years of practice, and, if it is to be done well by all, it requires skilful teaching from the outset. Within the set of skills needed for writing fluency, there is spelling, often not given its full due because it is regarded as a lower-order or mechanical skill. When students do not learn spelling easily, however, the difficulty forms a bottleneck that often limits the expression of higher-order writing skills. The teaching challenge involved in helping these students to improve their spelling is, in turn, surprisingly demanding. English spelling presents a host of challenges to both students and teachers. It is a very complex system, and is essentially multi-layered, reflecting intricate, context-dependent patterns of sound-letter

correspondences and meaning-related considerations, as well as reflecting the history of English borrowings from other languages. Many teachers are not confident about teaching spelling, and unfortunately, spelling practice may well be the greatest victim of wasted opportunity in literacy instruction. The number of "spelling activities" available that do nothing to increase spelling ability is astounding.

This article is about practising spelling, rather than about choosing words to be taught or helping students to understand the meaning and phonemic and morphemic structure of the words.

The Spelling Activities Scale, below, is based on a collection I have made over the years of homework sheets that have been given to my children. I then placed them on a scale of merit, ranging from toxic, through useless and then to helpful.

To determine the place of each spelling practice activity on the scale, I asked the question, "Will this improve/reinforce a typically developing child's ability to spell?"

Before I go on, I'd like to stress again that this article is about spelling practice – what teachers can do to help students consolidate what they have been taught about the spelling of words, and reach a point of automaticity and fluency in spelling. There are several critical aspects of literacy learning that are not on this scale; I take it that they go without saying. One such aspect is the act of silent reading. Reading increases exposure to words and patterns and increases vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich 2001). But it is not a spelling activity.

Even more importantly, explicit, systematic, direct, cumulative, structured teaching with a clear scope and sequence is not on this scale either. It is, rather, taken as a *sine qua non*.

This Spelling Activities Scale refers to

activities to reinforce the teaching of sets of words and orthographic patterns, once they have had their phonemic structure explored, and have been defined, with their meaning components, including morphemes and root words, fully analysed. When literacy teaching is not explicit, systematic, direct, cumulative and structured, and does not include meaningful analysis of the spelling words to be studied, the spelling practice activities outlined here will be characterised by a shorter helpful arrow, with a corresponding increase in length of the longer, toxic arrow.

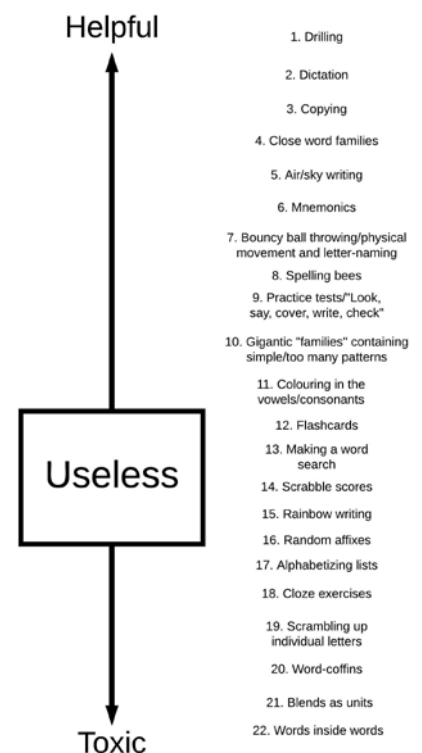


Figure 1. The Spelling Activities Scale

Anything on the helpful part of the Spelling Activities Scale will have some positive, long-lasting effect. Anything on the useless part may have a temporary effect, but offers nothing long-lasting or constituting a good use of learning time. Useless strategies have about the same effect as cramming for an exam, which gives them a temporary appearance of useful. Anything in the toxic area will help to instil poor habits in typically developing children and will risk actually impeding the progress of those with learning difficulties.

For some children, toxic activities also include those things that may be helpful for others. For example, spelling bees can be too confronting and anxiety-causing for some children, and will fail to teach them anything except to avoid school.

In a similar vein, some activities deemed useless could actually prove to be toxic for children with learning difficulties. These children need to spend their time doing things to improve their skills. Useless activities rob them of crucial practice and opportunity to

improve, thus rendering those activities toxic in the long term.

I daresay there are many more activities not mentioned, but the ones that make it into the helpful zone involve processing words from left to right, in the correct sequence, all the way through. Any activity that requires messing with letter sequences begins to slide into the useless/toxic zone.

Toxic spelling activities

We'll start with the worst. At the very bottom of the scale, and toxic to everybody, is the act of asking students to look for words inside words, irrespective of whether they are linked in meaning. This is not the same as separating root words from their affixes (e.g. play + -ing = playing), but instead, for example, getting them to spot the word sin in business or win in throwing. It is simply irrelevant and not generalisable to any other words.

Then comes blends as units. I have written about this extensively in a blog piece called Round the Blend, but in summary, my experience tells

me that activities promoting clusters of consonants such as st- in stop or -nd in hand as single units are not linguistically accurate and are the direct cause reading and spelling errors in too many cases. Some students who struggle with the awareness of the separate phonemes in a consonant cluster find it very difficult to make sense of spelling when the identity of the phonemes is not clarified for them.

Useless strategies have about the same effect as cramming for an exam, which gives them a temporary appearance of useful

This brings us to word-coffins. This is not a widely used term (because I just coined it last week), but it is certainly a widely used activity. This is where children are directed to analyse words according to their shapes. They draw boxes around them, or write words into pre-fabricated word boxes. This activity is so devoid of anything resembling good practice, it actually pains me to mention it. I am not sure what theory it could possibly be based on, except some dreadful "visual" part of the baseless 3-cueing system. They are called word-coffins because to me, those boxes signal that high quality spelling instruction is as dead as a doornail in this classroom.

I've also heard of word-coffins being referred to as Elkonin boxes, but they are not the same thing. Daniil Elkonin, a Russian-Soviet psychologist, would no doubt have been very disappointed to see his name applied to such a dreadful activity. Elkonin boxes, which give a phonology-spelling framework, are useful. The boxes are all the same size, and each orthographic pattern is represented within one box and matched to the phoneme it represents. The value of this task is to draw students' attention to the idea that there are different phonemes in words which can be isolated through careful listening and awareness of the position of the lips, tongue and teeth.

Bordering on useless for average learners, but toxic for struggling children, is the act of reducing words to individual letters and cutting/jumbling them up for reassembly. Placing orthographic patterns in memory requires exposure to the correct sequence of letters (Ehri 2014). Messing

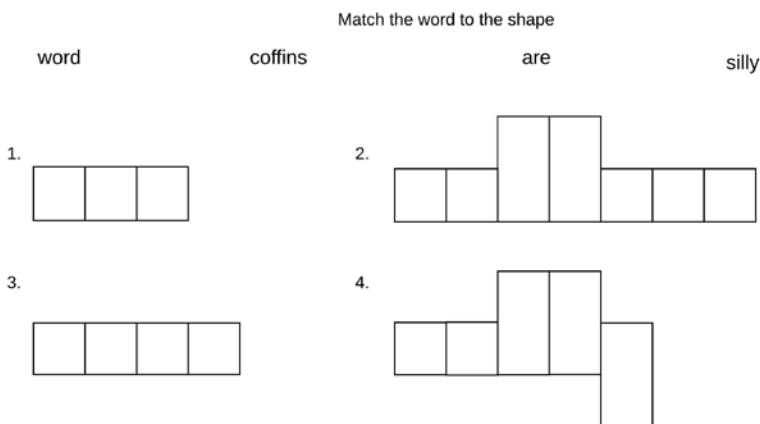


Figure 2 Word-coffins

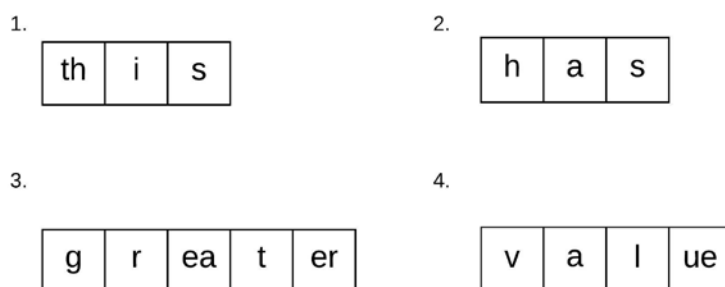


Figure 3 Elkonin boxes

about with an incorrect sequence risks diminishing, not increasing, a child's memory for orthographic patterns.

Similarly, fill in the missing letter exercises can be detrimental to struggling students, and for typically developing students, I ask, "What's the point? It is better to spend time reading and writing whole words than engaging in no-sequence, no-pattern busy work."

Alphabetising lists of words is great if you want to teach the order of the alphabet, but not much else. As a spelling activity, it is generally useless, and if relied upon too heavily, reinforces the unhelpful habit of only paying attention to the first letter of a word.

Useless spelling activities

Then we enter the great grey desert of useless activities. They won't really harm anyone, but they won't teach much, if anything, about spelling. We begin with lists containing random words, some with affixes attached and some not. These can be toxic in the absence of explicit instruction in morphology. For example, a Google search for "Grade 3 spelling list" often yields something like the following hotchpotch:

- why
- began
- parties
- being
- hopping
- beautiful
- knight

Each one of these words could be used as a gateway to understanding more about English spelling, but instead, they are lumped together as whole words, to be crammed as an unrelated list and never to be used again. No pattern is learned that would help with the spelling of similar words. No awareness is gained of morphology or etymology. The task is much harder than it need be and much less effective than it could be.

Next up is "rainbow writing" (writing a word using a different colour for every letter). It verges on the toxic because it is so prevalent, time-consuming and yet so devoid of merit. Like jumbled letters, it disguises orthographic patterns. Any activity that requires a child to use more than two colouring implements is art, not literacy.

Then there is the bizarre practice of assigning Scrabble word scores to spelling words. Each letter, due to its frequency, has a certain score. The letter <e>, being the most common, has a score of 1, whereas <x> and <j>

have 8 points etc. This may slightly enhance the statistical learning aspect of spelling (Arciuli & Simpson 2012), but on such a small and painstaking scale that it's hardly worth the bother. Regular reading is far more likely to establish an understanding of letter frequency, so why not do that?

We do have some pretty excellent software that will create word search puzzles at the push of a button, and for that, we can be thankful. But it's hardly an activity that places correct patterns into the orthographic lexicon at any rate worth spending time on. However, searching for words in a word search puzzle is a time-consuming activity that fails to cement the orthographic lexicon efficiently.

I see flashcards being recommended for helping with spelling, but I've yet to see how they could possibly be useful. If you flash a word at a person, you are asking them to memorise a word for reading, not for spelling. I know of no research study that has shown whole word methods to be superior to structured literacy in any aspect of learning to read and write. Flashcards for spelling practice are of little use.

Moving towards useful activities...

Colouring, circling or underlining vowels and consonants in words is the first activity on the scale that requires actual processing from left to right. It's still a bit mindless, but we're at last getting somewhere, because the focus is on drawing student attention to syllable structure and orthographic patterns, even if the mechanics of circling or colouring are clumsy and time consuming.

Word families are terrific things... if planned and sequenced carefully in a way that draws student attention to learning that can be generalised. For example, learning the 'igh' words (high, tight, light) all at one time makes great sense. Poorly conceptualised groupings that are based on limited teacher knowledge are confusing because they are not generalisable. For example, lied, tier and chief ought not be grouped together. Each is based on a different orthographic pattern, and lumping these words together makes no sense to students. Likewise, putting nose, road and slow in the same 'family' doesn't help students to understand which spelling of a particular phoneme should be chosen. Sometimes, the demands are even greater. Learning to spell play,

fate, neigh, rain, steak, and obey all at once is much too complex and the words in these families often contain other information that needs to be explicitly taught.

I see hundreds of worksheets based on rime/coda "word families", such as pan, man, can etc. This is a waste of time, given that this type of simple CVC pattern is relatively easy to perceive and represent. That is, it is more efficient to learn the individual letters and sounds and combine these to read and spell words than it is to also learn combinations like 'an'. If you know 'a' and 'n', then learning 'an' as a word family is superfluous. Worse still, are vast "families" based on a single letter, usually an initial consonant, like run, right, ranunculus (okay, I exaggerated the last one, but it might as well be on these lists, for all the good they do).

If you want your families to work, use close families, not random, sprawling ones. One example of a close, useful family, is the group of nine separate words that can be generated just by adding a different consonant to the word all (ball, call, fall, gall, hall, mall, pall, tall and wall). They are often misspelled, so I have them generated, defined, used in sentences and drilled as the all family and I usually see long-term transfer to subsequent dictation and composition pieces.

Another useful word family is that of words with 'wa'. It is useful to know that the letter <a> is affected by a preceding <w> in many words. This is what I call the w-effect. The letter <w> makes the <a> say /ɔ/, such as in was, wash, want and wand. This is a useful family for several reasons:

- It contains many high-frequency words.
- It applies broadly.
- It can be used to illustrate the vowel-changing properties of <w> in other words (work, war etc.). I tell students to be suspicious if they see <w> preceding <a> or <o>.

Sometimes my students even get inspired to illustrate the W Effect, like my friend Douglas did quite dramatically in Figure 4 (in his own time, in addition to his reading and spelling homework, not in place of it).



Figure 4. W Effect picture

The teaching of these families does not precede instruction in sound-symbol relationships and phonological processing, but is intended to be used as a bridge between phonology and orthography.

Sliding back down to the slightly helpful area, practice tests are often recommended as a spelling activity. They fall into a similar zone as the “Look, say, cover, write, check” catchphrase that is rampant in Australian schools. In isolation, these activities teach nothing except that the student is still wrong or hasn’t crammed the words successfully. Perhaps as part of a larger, more explicit, systematic sequence of teaching and learning, where students have the opportunity to self-correct and reflect on the patterns they find difficult to remember, they have some value.

Spelling bees are a somewhat discriminatory, only really favouring the 1-2 exposure types who memorise words easily, but if done cooperatively and in teams, where everyone who wants to participate gets a turn, they can be quite good practice.

Practising spelling through letter-naming whilst being engaged in a physical activity makes some sense, if the words are directly and explicitly taught first. There is always something to be gained from practice, and it might be a bonus that this type of practice is more appealing to some students than just sitting. It is a form of drilling, and if drills can be fun without distracting from the purpose, there is no harm in that.

Using mnemonics (memory hooks) for selected words is helpful, if used appropriately. It is tempting to try and rely too heavily on mnemonics, so my rule of thumb is that if a word can be sounded out using the child’s store of known patterns, a mnemonic is a waste of time. Mnemonics come down to personal preference and teacher knowledge, but I urge caution when applying them too liberally. A strange example of this is teaching a mnemonic for the word geography. I have seen it presented as “George’s elderly old grandfather rode a pig home yesterday.” The opportunity to teach three very useful morphemes, geo-, -graph- and -y would be lost in favour of a nonsensical sentence.

Having said that, one of my favourite mnemonics is for library. I could teach students that the word library comes from libr, meaning “book” and that libr is thought to be in the same etymological family as leaf, or that it has a noun-forming suffix: -ary, or even that it is

often said with a collapsed syllable in the middle, but I prefer just to say, “There’s a BRA in the library!” Not many forget it after that.

The Top Five

The top five activities in the countdown all require rapid recall and writing. These, more than any other, will deliver the necessary practice in spelling to improve long-term recall.

Five: Air/sky writing. I’ve been watching this activity emerge over the years, and I must say, judiciously used, it seems promising. This is when children use their fingers to write their target words in the air. It is important when doing this activity that students always recite the words from the first letter to the last rather than backwards, for example.

Four: Word families: I cannot stress enough the importance of grouping words to be learned as a spelling focus into close, logical families. This can be done along orthographic, etymological or morphological lines (and those lines often overlap).

Three: Copying. Copying words, sentences and paragraphs is a great way not only to practise fluency and spelling, using a scaffolded, stable framework, but if used purposefully, can also enhance everything else that constitutes writing.

Two: Dictation is slightly harder, in that students have to use their memory for spelling and writing conventions. It is doubly useful to copy and dictate sentences and paragraphs using explicitly taught words.

One: Drilling: At the very top we have drilling. Yep, good old drilling. Old-fashioned, old-school, back-to-basics, traditional drilling. I don’t care what names are thrown at me for recommending this, and neither does any teacher/practitioner worth their salt. By drilling, I mean going over and over an expanding list of words. Here’s a simple procedure:

- Harvest words from written compositions by students, focusing on words that are misspelled
- Model the spelling of each word and have students write them in columns.
- Have students indicate, through a simple marking system, e.g. underlining digraphs, placing a cross underneath silent letters etc., the parts that they need to pay most attention to. Place them in families containing similar difficult parts.
- Drill the words, first by sounding each phoneme and then by saying the whole word.

- Define and use each word in a sentence
- Use the words in copied/dictated sentences and paragraphs.
- Have students compose sentences containing the words.
- Build up to hundreds of words and practise drilling the columns frequently.

If you give a list of spelling words to a child to learn, that child has made an investment of time and cognitive effort. A return on that investment will only come if the child has had enough exposure to the word and enough practice writing it, from start to finish, from left to right. Too often, children are asked to make an investment for zero yield, and then are blamed for getting low scores in measures of spelling ability or for losing faith and motivation. On the other hand, if carefully and explicitly taught, and practised to mastery, spelling word lists can provide a self-extending treasure trove that lasts a lifetime.

Lyn Stone is a linguist and literacy and language specialist. She is a regular contributor to the Australian print and radio media on linguistics as it relates to education and has been featured many times on ABC Radio and Fairfax media, talking about spelling, grammar and dyslexia. Lyn’s two flagship programmes, Spelling for Life and Language for Life have been implemented in schools with excellent results for over a decade and have been published by Routledge as two books. Her new book, Reading for Life will be released on December 20th 2018.

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