

For Parents · Free resource

The logic of English spelling

Why English looks so complicated — and why it's actually mostly not

The claim that changes everything

96% of English spelling is logical.

Not all of it is phonetically logical — not all spelling follows sound patterns. But when you add in morphology (meaning) and etymology (word history), the vast majority of English spelling follows discoverable patterns.

Only around 4% of English words are genuinely irregular — words whose spelling cannot be predicted or explained by any known rule.

(Source: Moats, L.C. (2006). How spelling supports reading. American Educator.)

This matters because most people — and most children — believe English spelling is largely random. It isn't. It just follows more than one set of rules at once.

Why English spelling looks hard

English has absorbed words from more languages than almost any other language on Earth. Each wave of borrowing brought new words — and their original spelling conventions.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) — the foundation. Words like *the, that, and, house, child, land, water, love*. Often phonetically regular, using patterns children learn in phonics.

Old Norse — Vikings arrived in the 9th century and contributed words like *sky, window, egg, knife, take, give*. Many with *kn-* and *sk-* patterns.

Norman French — after 1066, the ruling class spoke French. Thousands of French words entered English: *government, justice, colour, beauty, restaurant, chef*. French brought its own spelling conventions, including *ch* making /ʃ/ (*chef, machine*) and *-tion* endings.

Latin — through the Church, law, science, and medicine. Latin words often enter with their original Latin spellings intact: *science, describe, require, position*.

Greek — through Latin and through Renaissance scholarship. Greek scientific vocabulary: *physics, chemistry, rhythm, psychology, sphere*. Greek brought *ch* making /k/ (*chorus, character*) and *ph* making /f/ (*phone, photograph*).

The result: English spelling has multiple layers, each following its own internal logic.

The three layers of English spelling

Layer 1: Phonology (sounds)

The alphabetic layer. Each letter or letter combination represents a sound. This is what phonics teaches.

cat, ship, rain, light — these words spell exactly what they sound like, once you know the phonics.

About 50% of English words are reliably phonetic.

Layer 2: Morphology (meaning)

The meaning layer. Spelling preserves the structure of words across sound changes.

Example: *sign* and *signal*.

Say them aloud. The *g* is silent in *sign* but pronounced in *signal*. If spelling only followed sound, *sign* would be *sine*. But spelling records the root — *sign-* comes from Latin *signum* — and keeps the *g* visible across both words.

More examples:

bomb and *bombard* — the *b* is silent in *bomb* but pronounced in *bombard*

muscle and *muscular* — the *c* is silent in *muscle* but pronounced in *muscular*

autumn and *autumnal* — the *n* is silent in *autumn* but sounded in *autumnal*

condemn and *condemnation* — the *n* is silent in *condemn* but sounded in *condemnation*

Spelling keeps the root intact so readers can see the relationship between words. This is not an accident — it is design.

Layer 3: Etymology (history)

The historical layer. Spelling records where a word came from.

ch making /k/ → Greek origin (*chorus, chemistry, character, school*)

ch making /ʃ/ → French origin (*chef, machine, brochure*)

-tion ending → Latin via French (*station, information, education*)

kn- silent *k* → Old English, once pronounced (*know, knight, kneel*)

-ough letter string → Old English *-oh*, once a single sound (*night, through, enough*)

Once you know a word's origin, its spelling usually makes complete sense.

Some famous "exceptions" that aren't

knight

Why is there a *k* at the start and a *gh* in the middle?

In Middle English (1100–1500), *knight* was spelled *cniht* and pronounced something like "kuh-NIKHT" — both the *k* and the *gh* (which made a guttural sound like the *ch* in Scottish *loch*) were fully pronounced. As English pronunciation changed, both sounds disappeared, but the spelling remained frozen at the medieval pronunciation. The spelling is not wrong — it's historical.

doubt

Why is there a *b* in *doubt* when we don't say it?

The medieval English word was *doute* — no *b*. Then Renaissance scholars decided to make the spelling match the Latin origin: *dubitare*. They added the *b* artificially to show the connection to Latin. The *b* in *doubt* is a deliberate scholarly addition that arrived around 1500. It records the Latin etymology, not the pronunciation.

necessary

Why one *c* and two *ss*?

From Latin *necessarius*: *ne-* (not) + *cessarius* (giving way) — a word meaning "unavoidable." The Latin spelling had one *c* and one *ss*. English kept it. The *necessary* mnemonic ("one collar, two socks") is useful precisely because understanding the Latin count helps fix the pattern.

What this means for children

Children who understand that spelling records **sound + meaning + history** have a fundamentally different relationship with English spelling than children who think it's arbitrary.

When they encounter an unfamiliar word:

A "spelling is random" child: "I'll just guess"

A "spelling has logic" child: "What does this look like? Is there a prefix? What language is it from?"

The second child has tools. The first has anxiety.

This is why SpellCast teaches the logic — not just the lists.

The 4% that is genuinely unpredictable

Some words cannot be explained by any known rule:

colonel — pronounced /'kɜ:nəl/ despite the spelling

yacht — from Dutch *jacht*, kept in its original form

queue — from French *queue* (tail), where only the first *q* does any work

Wednesday — from Old English *Wōdnesdæg* (Woden's day), the *d* contracted from *Oden-* as pronunciation changed

people — from Old French *peuple*, itself from Latin *populus*; the *eo* reflects a medieval English pronunciation shift

These are the genuine exceptions — words where spelling cannot be predicted even with full etymological knowledge. They are also rare. Learning 200 irregular words is manageable. Believing that all 50,000 common English words are equally unpredictable is paralysing — and wrong.

The bottom line

English spelling is a record of English history. It preserves the sounds, structures, and origins of thousands of years of language development. When it looks confusing, it's usually because you're looking at one layer when the answer lies in another.

Learn the phonics. Then learn the morphology. Then explore the etymology. By the time a child reaches Year 6 with all three layers understood, they can work out the spelling of almost any word they encounter — not by guessing, but by thinking.

That's what "*96% of English spelling is logical*" means in practice.

Sources:

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