

For Parents · Free resource

Year-by-year spelling guide for parents

What your child is learning and how to support them at home

Reception through Year 6 · English National Curriculum

How to use this guide

Each section covers one year group: what your child is being taught, why it matters, and one or two simple things you can do at home to help. You don't need to be a teacher. Five minutes a few times a week, done regularly, is worth more than an hour once in a while.

(Source: Baddeley & Longman (1978) — short, frequent practice significantly outperforms longer, infrequent sessions for skill acquisition.)

Reception (ages 4–5)

What they're learning

Reception is almost entirely about **phonics** — the relationship between sounds and letters.

Your child is learning:

That letters represent sounds (*s, a, t, p, i, n...*)

To blend sounds together to read (*c-a-t* → *cat*)

To segment words into sounds for spelling (*cat* → *c-a-t*)

The names of letters alongside their sounds

They are not yet expected to spell independently. The goal is building the foundations.

What helps at home

Read together daily. The more words your child sees in books, the more spelling patterns become familiar.

Play "I spy" with sounds: "I spy something beginning with the /s/ sound" (use the sound, not the letter name).

Sing the alphabet — knowing letter names helps alongside knowing letter sounds.

Year 1 (ages 5–6)

What they're learning

Your child is consolidating all 44 phonemes in English and learning to spell:

Words with double letters at the end of short words (*off, well, miss, back*)

The split digraph / magic *e* (*make, bike, home, tune*)

Plurals with *-s* and *-es*

The prefix *un-* (*unhappy, undo*)

Common exception words — 45 words that don't follow the usual phonics patterns (*the, said, was, love, come, school, friend*)

The common exception words

These words come up constantly in reading and writing. If your child can spell them automatically, they can focus their mental energy on the content of their writing rather than on spelling.

The list: *the, a, do, to, today, of, said, says, are, were, was, is, his, has, I, you, your, they, be, he, me, she, we, no, go, so, by, my, here, there, where, love, come, some, one, once, ask, friend, school, put, push, pull, full, house, our*

What helps at home

Play "word hunts" in books: "Can you find the word *said*?"

Practice the exception words in short bursts — 3–5 words at a time.

Say words in syllables: *sch-ool* (two beats), *to-gether* (three beats). Syllable awareness helps with spelling.

Year 2 (ages 6–7)

What they're learning

Year 2 introduces the three fundamental suffix rules your child will use forever:

The doubling rule: when a short-vowel word ends in a single consonant, double it before adding *-ing*, *-ed*, *-er*. *run* → *running*, *hop* → *hopped*

The drop-the-e rule: when a word ends in silent *e*, drop it before adding a vowel suffix: *make* → *making*, *nice* → *nicer*

The y-to-i rule: when a word ends in consonant + *y*, change *y* to *i* before most suffixes: *happy* → *happier*, *carry* → *carried*

They also learn: the *-ment*, *-ness*, *-ful*, *-less*, *-ly* suffixes · contractions (*don't*, *I'm*) · possessive apostrophe (*the cat's hat*) · common exception words for Year 2

Why these rules matter

Every piece of writing your child does from Year 2 onwards requires these rules — constantly. A child who internalises the doubling rule in Year 2 stops making errors like *runing* and *hopping* for the rest of their life. These are genuinely foundational.

What helps at home

When you read together, point out a double letter occasionally: "Look — *running*. Why do you think it has two *ns*?"

Dictate simple sentences using this week's school spellings. Saying the words, hearing them, and writing them from memory is far more effective than copying them from a list.

Ask your child to explain their thinking: "How do you know *hopped* has two *ps*?" If they can explain it, they know it.

Year 3/4 (ages 7–9)

What they're learning

Year 3/4 is where spelling shifts from sounds to meaning. Children learn:

Nine prefixes: *un-*, *dis-*, *mis-*, *re-*, *sub-*, *inter-*, *super-*, *anti-*, *auto-*

Key suffixes: *-ation*, *-ly*, *-ous*, *-tion/-sion/-ssion/-cian*

Etymology patterns: why *ch* makes /k/ in *chemist* (Greek) and /ʃ/ in *chef* (French)

The 100 statutory words for Year 3/4 — including *separate*, *necessary*, *February*, *disappear*

The big shift: from sounds to meaning

96% of English spelling is logical — but not all of it follows sound patterns. From Year 3, children learn that spelling records **meaning** and **history** as well as sound.

Example: *sign* and *signal* share a spelling even though they sound different. The *g* is silent in *sign* but pronounced in *signal*. The shared spelling shows they share a meaning (*sign-* comes from Latin *signum*). Once children understand this, they remember the *g* in *sign* — because they know it belongs to the word's family.

The 100 statutory words

These must be taught by the end of Year 4. The hardest ones for most children:

separate ("there's a rat in **separate**") · *necessary* (one collar, two socks: one *c*, two *ss*) · *February* (four syllables: Feb-**ru**-ar-y) · *disappear* (*dis-* + *appear* — prefix intact) · *probably* (*probable* → drop *-le* add *-y*)

What helps at home

Ask: "What does *un-* mean?" See if they can generate five more *un-* words.

When your child misspells a word, ask: "Is there a prefix or suffix in this word?" Morphology is the key to Year 3/4.

Etymology is fascinating at this age. "Did you know *school* comes from a Greek word meaning *leisure*?" Children who love word stories remember spellings.

Year 5/6 (ages 9–11)

What they're learning

Year 5/6 covers the most complex patterns in English spelling. Children learn:

The /fəs/ sound: *-cious vs -tious* (spacious / ambitious)

The /fəl/ sound: *-cial vs -tial* (official / partial)

The -ant/-ance/-ancy vs -ent/-ence/-ency choice

The -able vs -ible choice

The -fer doubling rule (*referring vs reference*)

The *ei* after *c* rule (*receive, perceive*)

The -ough string (seven different sounds)

Silent letters (*doubt, island, knight*)

The 100 statutory words — including *accommodate, parliament, mischievous, rhythm*

Why these patterns are hard

Most of these require knowing something about the word's history — not just its sound.

Mischievous has three syllables (mis-CHIE-vous), not four. *Pronunciation* is not spelled *pronounciation* — the base shifts from *pronounce* to *pronunci-*. *Rhythm* comes from Greek and has no vowels except *y*.

The good news: 97% of the patterns follow discoverable rules. Only the genuinely random exceptions (like *weird* or *seize*) need pure memorisation.

The 100 statutory words

These must be taught by the end of Year 6. The most commonly misspelled by adults too:

accommodation · embarrass · necessary · separate · definitely · privilege · conscience · mischievous · rhythm · parliament

What helps at home

Talk about word origins when they come up naturally: "Apparently *muscle* comes from a Latin word for *little mouse* — because of the way a muscle moves under skin."

Encourage your child to look up where a word comes from. The Oxford dictionaries website has free etymology for most words.

Dictation remains the single most effective home practice: read a sentence, child writes it from memory, check together.

The most important thing at every age

Retrieval practice beats re-reading every time.

Copying a word list out ten times does almost nothing for long-term memory. Being *tested* on a word — having to retrieve it from memory before seeing it — builds a lasting memory trace every time. This is the principle behind SpellCast, and it's backed by decades of research.

(Source: Roediger & Karpicke (2006). Test-Enhanced Learning. Psychological Science, 17(3). The testing effect: students who practised by self-testing remembered 50% more after a week than students who re-read the same material.)

Short, regular, test-style practice at home — even just five minutes, three times a week — is the single most effective thing a parent can do for their child's spelling.

Sources:

DfE (2013). English Appendix 1: Spelling. National Curriculum for England.

Roediger & Karpicke (2006). Test-Enhanced Learning. Psychological Science.

Baddeley & Longman (1978). The Influence of Training Session Length and Frequency. Ergonomics.

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