

Years 5 & 6 · Free resource

***ei* after *c* for the /i:/ sound**

Year group: 5/6

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 5–6

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

The traditional rhyme — "*i before e except after c*" — applies specifically when the sound is /i:/ (a long "ee" sound).

When the sound is /i:/ and follows *c*: spell it *ei*

receive, perceive, conceive, deceive, ceiling

When the sound is /i:/ and does NOT follow *c*: spell it *ie*

believe, achieve, relief, piece, field

The important qualifier: this rule **only applies when the sound is /i:/**. When the *ei* or *ie* makes a different sound, a different pattern applies (see below).

***ei* after *c* – the core examples**

Word	Root meaning
receive	Latin <i>recipere</i> – to take back
perceive	Latin <i>percipere</i> – to understand through the senses
conceive	Latin <i>concipere</i> – to form an idea; to become pregnant
deceive	Latin <i>decipere</i> – to mislead
ceiling	Old French <i>ciel</i> (sky) – the indoor sky

All five are statutory Y5/6 words. Note: all except *ceiling* are from Latin *-cipere* (to take/grasp) — they are a word family.

ie when NOT after c (/i:/ sound)

Word	
believe	
achieve	
relief	
piece	
field	
shield	
yield	
brief	
thief	
grief	
niece	
chief	

Exceptions – when *ei* makes a different sound

The rule only applies to the /i:/ sound. Many common words use *ei* for other sounds — these are NOT exceptions to the rule, they are simply outside its scope:

Word	Sound	Category
eight	/eɪ/	number
weight	/eɪ/	heaviness
height	/aɪ/	tallness
their	/eə/	belonging to them
vein	/eɪ/	blood vessel
rein	/eɪ/	strap for a horse
reign	/eɪ/	a monarch's rule
neighbour	/eɪ/	person next door
sleigh	/eɪ/	a snow sled

Genuine exceptions to the i-before-e rule (/i:/ sound but NOT following c)

Some words have *ei* making the /i:/ sound without following *c*. These are genuine exceptions that must be learned individually:

Word	Note
seize	to grab
protein	a nutrient
caffeine	a stimulant
either	one or the other (can also be /aɪ/)
neither	not one or the other
weird	strange
seize	to grab suddenly

These words cannot be predicted by rule — they must be learned.

Etymology note

The *i before e except after c* rule reflects a real pattern in words from French and Latin that entered English after 1066. In French, the *-ceive* words (*recevoir*, *percevoir*) all had the *ei* pattern after *c*. The *-ieve* words (*croire*, *acheiver*) had the *ie* pattern. When English absorbed these, the spelling patterns came too. The rule is not arbitrary — it records the French spelling system that was imposed on English after the Norman Conquest.

Common mistakes

Wrong	Right	Reason
<i>recieve</i>	receive	<i>ei</i> after <i>c</i>
<i>percieve</i>	perceive	<i>ei</i> after <i>c</i>
<i>decieve</i>	deceive	<i>ei</i> after <i>c</i>
<i>beleive</i>	believe	<i>ie</i> not after <i>c</i>
<i>acheive</i>	achieve	<i>ie</i> not after <i>c</i>
<i>cieling</i>	ceiling	<i>ei</i> after <i>c</i>
<i>wierd</i>	weird	genuine exception – must be memorised

Word sort

Sort by whether the *-ei-* or *-ie-* follows *c* or not.

Words: receive · believe · perceive · achieve · ceiling · relief · conceive · field · deceive · piece · seize · chief · grief

<i>ei</i> after <i>c</i>	<i>ie</i> (not after <i>c</i>)	Exception (must memorise)

Dictation sentences

She could not **conceive** of a reason to **deceive** her closest friend.

The **ceiling** of the cave was so low that she had to **perceive** her way by touch.

He did not **believe** the team would **achieve** such a remarkable **relief** in the final minutes.

To **receive** a prize is a great honour; to **seize** one dishonestly is another matter entirely.

She found the novel **weird** but compelling — she could not put it down for a moment's **relief**.

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). The i-before-e rule is explicitly cited in the Years 5–6 statutory content with the examples: receive, conceive, deceive, perceive, ceiling, and the exceptions: protein, caffeine, seize.