**4.1 Webster Offers Us a More Color(Colour)ful Language**

**key words**: language change, spelling, dictionaries, history of English

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2f Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., *word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts*) in writing words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2g Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed to check and correct spellings. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2d Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

You know those differences between American and British spelling? Words like *color/colour* or *center/centre*? Well, Noah Webster is responsible for most of them. We mostly know of Webster because of his dictionaries, the first of which was published in 1828, but he was also a [spelling reformer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_spelling_reform), political writer, editor, and author.

Webster wanted to make the language of the U.S. distinct from that of Britain, and he believed spelling some words differently was one good way to do that. So slowly, edition by edition of both the spelling book and the dictionary, Webster introduced [American English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_English) spellings, replacing "colour" with "color", substituting "wagon" for "waggon", and *“defense” for “defence*”. You can see from the chart below that some of this changes stuck; others didn’t.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **WEBSTER WON SOME:** | | **...AND LOST SOME:** | |
| **Before Webster** | **Webster's Change** | **Before Webster** | **Webster's Change** |
| gaol | jail | ache | ake |
| mould | mold | soup | soop |
| travelled | traveled | sleigh | sley |
| honour | honor | sponge | spunge |
| centre | center | tongue | tung |
| humour | humor | cloak | cloke |
| masque | mask | determine | determin |
| publick | public | women | wimmen |

from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/spelling-reform.htm>

Our spelling system is fairly fixed now, but is still in flux to some extent. For example, there has recently been an increase in the spelling of *theatre* with *-re* rather than *-er*. You’ll see both *theater* and *theatre*, but the more British -*re* spelling seems to be used now to refer to dramatic **theatre** as opposed to a movie **theater.**

How and why do you think changes like this happen? Who decides when a spelling can change? None of the other words with *-re* seem to be changing (center-centre, fiber-fibre). And some never did change from *-re* to *-er;* for example,*-re* following <c> or <g> remained, so we have *acre* and *ogre*, not *aker* or *oger* as Webster wanted.

Can you think of other words that have more than one spelling for the very same meaning?

Look up these words and see what dictionaries have to say about these spellings: grey-gray, judgement-judgment, thru-through, archaeology-archeology, disc-disk, axe-ax, sceptic-skeptic, whiskey-whisky, yoghurt-yogurt.

**4.2 Weird Spellings Explained**

**key words**: language change, spelling, history of English, Latin

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Did you know that the “k” in words like *know, knight, knock,* and *knot* used to be pronounced? K-nock K-nock! Our spelling system used to match our pronunciation much more closely – all those so-called silent letters such as the “e”s at the ends of lots of words, including *like*, *some, cane,* and *rake*; the “b” in words like *dumb, comb,* and *climb*; and even the “gh” in words like *thought, though, caught*, used to be pronounced.

But language changes. All languages are in a constant state of gradual change. Much of our spelling system reflects the pronunciation of people who were speaking English 1000 years ago when it was just beginning to be written down. So often the language changes, but the spelling doesn’t.

Do you think we should revise the spelling system so that it better matches our pronunciation? What would be some good things about this? What would be some problems?

Sometimes those who wrote down our language got spellings wrong – and now we’re stuck with those weird spellings. This has happened throughout the history of English, but happened quite a bit in the 18th century. Scholars were obsessed with the ideas of Ancient Greece and Rome, and they wanted English to borrow not only many words and word roots from both Greek and Latin, but also spellings. They felt this gave English more credibility if it shared some spelling conventions with these respected (though dead!) languages. So, for example,

English got the word *debt* from the French word *dette*. However, it had originally come into French from Latin debere, meaning ‘to owe,’ so the <b> was added into the English spelling beginning sometime after about 1400. The *King James Bible,* from the early 17th century, has spellings with the <b> and without, as well as other variations: detter, debter, debtor, and debtour all appear.

Sometimes these Latin respellings did not affect pronunciation, as with the <b> in *debt.* Other times, the new spelling did alter pronunciation so that the modern spelling and pronunciation match up a bit better; for example, *adventure*, came from Middle English *aventure*, but the <d> (from Latin *aduentas*) was put back in in both spelling and then in speech. So if you have problems with the spelling of some of these words, it’s not your fault! Blame those 18th century scribes!

Look up the following words on the *Online Etymological Dictionary* to discover their previous spellings and their languages of origins.

salmon, receipt, island, indict, solder, often, Wednesday, asthma, colonel

**4.3 Noun Pluralization and Spelling: Y-Endings**

**key words**: spelling, nouns, suffixes, morphology

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2f](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f/) Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., *word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts*) in writing words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f>

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[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.2e](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e>

You know that the main way we pluralize nouns is to add an *–s* to the noun. But sometimes we have to change the spelling of the original noun when adding the *–s*. Let’s figure out some of the patterns of these spelling changes.

1. Give the plural forms of these words.

baby

party

spy

family

city

Write a rule to describe the spelling pattern. “When the word ends in \_\_, then you \_\_\_.

2. Now consider these words and give their plural forms.

day

turkey

boy

freeway

monkey

Write a rule to describe the spelling pattern of these kinds of words. Be sure that your rule is as simple as it can be while still describing all of the data.

**4.4 Noun Pluralization and Spelling: F-Endings**

**key words**: spelling, nouns, suffixes, morphology

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2f](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f/) Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., *word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts*) in writing words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2d](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.2e](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e>

1. Give the plural forms of these words.

chief

belief

giraffe

cuff

safe

Write a rule to describe the spelling pattern. “When the word ends in \_\_, then you \_\_\_.

2. Now consider these words and give their plural forms.

wolf

life

elf

self

knife

leaf

Write a rule to describe the spelling pattern of these words.

3. Give the plural forms of these words.

roof

hoof

scarf

wharf

dwarf

Is there more than one way to correctly spell these words? Discuss what you find here.

[Teacher Notes: The words in (3) have two standard spellings, either with just –s or with –ves replacing the –f. Students may wonder why we change those <f>s to <v>s. because in Old English the vowel before the final “s” was pronounced and a rule of Old English was that when a fricative sound like /f/ came between “voiced” vowel sounds, it too became voiced (produced with vocal cord vibration). So, for example, the plural of *wulf* meaning ‘wolf’ was [wulvas] phonetically, though it would be spelled ‘wulfas.’ So our current state of pluralization of words that end in /f/ illustrates the conflict between our natural phonological rule of pluralization (just add –s) and the influence of spelling on pronunciation. ]

**4.5 Noun Pluralization and Spelling: O-Endings**

**key words**: spelling, nouns, suffixes, morphology

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2f](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f/) Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., *word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts*) in writing words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2d](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.2e](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e>

1. Give the plural forms of these words.

potato

echo

tomato

hero

volcano

Write a rule to describe the spelling pattern. “When the word ends in \_\_, then you \_\_\_.

2. Now consider these words and give their plural forms.

radio

studio

zoo

ratio

Write a rule to describe the spelling pattern of these words.

There are some exceptions to the patterns you found above. Some words have two correct plural spellings, such as *zeros, zeroes; avocados, avocadoes*, though one is more common. Which looks better to you? Abbreviated words add only -s: *kilos, photos*. What are the unabbreviated forms of these words? And the plurals of *o*-ending words borrowed from Italian are spelled with just -*s* in the plural: *pianos, concertos, solos, altos, sopranos*.

**4.6 Verbs, Adjective, Adverbs and Spelling: Changing *y* to *i***

**key words**: spelling, verbs, adjective, adverb, suffixes, morphology

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2f](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f/) Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., *word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts*) in writing words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2d](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/2/d>

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Consider the following data.

carry carried

copy copied

enjoy enjoyed

supply supplied

cry cried

fly flying

supply supplying

study studying

spy spying

busy busier

greedy greedier

lonely lonelier

lucky luckiest

tiny tiniest

sly slyly

shy shyly

Write a rule that accounts for the cases when we change the *y* to *i* and when we leave the y unchanged.

What form of word would be a counterexample to your theory?

Come up with some more data to see if your theory needs to be revised.

**4.7 Verb Tense and Spelling: Past Tense Endings**

**key words**: spelling, verbs, suffixes, morphology

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2f](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f/) Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., *word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts*) in writing words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/f>

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[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.2e](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e/) Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/2/e>

As you know, the regular way of forming the past tense of verbs in English is to add -*ed* to a verb root.

treat + -*ed* = treated

root + affix = past tense

Sometimes, however, the spelling changes when the past tense suffix is added.

1. Give the plural form of these words:

admit

commit

refer

What is the rule of past tense spelling based on these words?

2. When we look at more data, we may need to add another rule. What is the past tense form of these words?

inherit

target

visit

3. And when the word is only a single syllable, what is the past tense form?

stop

tap

sob

4. And finally, what is the past tense form of these words?

treat

wheel

pour

Write a rule to explain the spelling pattern.

[Teacher Notes: for (1) VC + ed = VCCed, for (2) VC + ed and stress not on last syllable = VCed, for (3) VC + ed and one syllable = VCCed, and for (4) VVC + ed = VVCed.]