



Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner answers a question about spelling

Chris Turner, our learning difficulties consultant, has many years experience providing sound advice to students and tutors who are struggling to master a particular skill. In this new feature column, Chris will answer real-life questions from tutors and students. Send your questions to the Council.

Dear Chris,

*My student is struggling with his spelling. He spells words the way they sound to him — for example, **capten** for **captain**. Often he spells using the word patterns we have been studying, but with the wrong words! For example **perance** for **parents**. How can I help him learn to spell better?*

K.M. — Tutor

Dear Tutor,

This is a common problem with phonetic spellers. Since your student is spelling words the way they sound and using the word family patterns you have taught him, he probably has strong auditory and verbal memory skills. However, it appears he may have poor visual memory.

Unfortunately, it can be very difficult for someone with either poor visual or auditory processing to learn to spell. Good spelling is a complex process that relies on both channels of information coming in clearly and easily. Of course, when spelling is poor, it also makes the writing process much more stressful, slowing students down and interfering with the creative flow. Reassure him that many great writers have been poor spellers and that slowly but surely he will improve.

In addition to working on word families and spelling patterns, you may want to develop two different types of word lists for special study.

1. High Frequency Words

Give him lots of practice with words that are commonly used in writing. High frequency words are listed in the back of the *Tutor Handbook*. The more automatically he can spell these words, the easier writing will be for him (and his readers!). Often students are over-ambitious. Work with only a few words (not more than ten at a time) until he has mastered them. Choose words he is misspelling in his own writing.

2. His Own Word Bank

Before he begins a writing project, have him brainstorm, listing the topics and main ideas he wants to write about. Then go over the spelling and write out correctly the list of words he has misspelled into a small alphabet-indexed notebook. (These are cheap to buy at an office supply store.) Most people find it easier to learn to spell words they are actually using. Over time, he will build up a spelling dictionary of his own words, which he can look up easily when he needs to.

Mnemonic Devices

People with poor visual processing have difficulty with homonyms — those pesky words that sound alike but look different. He will have to work at memorizing them. Mnemonic

devices that use both meaning and word parts help many students. It's fun to make up these sentences together. The sillier a mental picture you can make, the better and easier the recall. Mnemonics work best when you can associate the sounds, the meaning and a mental picture.

For example: The word great can mean big and it contains the word eat. Someone might be **great** because they **eat** a lot. A mnemonic sentence to help learn the difference between **great** and **grate** might be:

The **great** big man fell in the **grate**.



Final Words of Advice:

Don't work on too many words at once. That just leads to a sense of failure and then people give up.

Strongly encourage writing. It will help motivate him to work on his spelling. And make sure you link spelling practice to his writing.

Have your student try spelling words in the air using his whole arm to "write." This is especially helpful for kinesthetic learners — people who learn best through physical movement.

Some students might benefit from using a Franklin speller (a hand-held spell checking device) or using a computer spell-check program. Often this kinesthetic process helps a poor speller improve.