

Seven Strategies to Improve Your Spelling

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

Why is spelling important?

Correct spelling helps you produce accurate English. Writing is an essential part of your academic success at the university level. You need to learn how to use accurate spelling to communicate your ideas.

Seven strategies to improve your spelling

1. Write down the words you often spell in a wrong way

Note down your regularly misspelled words. Pay close attention to them to avoid making the same mistakes when you spell them next time.

2. Look up words in the dictionary

A good way is to look up the words you are not very sure of in the dictionary and check their spelling forms before you begin to write.

3. Pick either British English or American English and be consistent.

Both British spelling and American spelling are used in Canada. Be aware of the differences between the British spelling and the American spelling. Pick one of them and be consistent.

Seven general examples of word endings with British and American English

British ending	American ending	Example
-our	-or	Flavour vs. Flavor
-se	-ze	Realise vs. Realize
-tre	-ter	Theatre vs. Theater
-logue	-log	Dialogue vs. Dialog
-gramme	-gram	Programme vs. Program
-que	-ck	Cheque vs. Check
-se	-ce	License vs. Licence

There are also many other examples of how British and American spelling differ.

4. Distinguish homonyms

Definition

Homonyms are words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings. They can be very tricky, but if you are aware of them, you can use the correct words.

<http://blogs.monm.edu/writingatmc/writing-center/writing-center-resources/esl-resources/homonyms/>

Here is a list of common homonyms to be aware of:

- affect vs. effect
- affluent vs. effluent
- cast vs. caste
- finish vs. furnish
- piece vs. peace
- policy vs. police
- rational vs. rationale
- sheer vs. shear
- steel vs. steal

5. Be careful with prefixes and suffixes that sound alike

Definition

A **prefix** is a group of letters placed before the root of a word. For example, the word “unhappy” consists of the prefix “un-” (which means “not”) combined with the root word “happy”; the word “unhappy” means “not happy.”

<https://www.lexico.com/en/grammar/prefixes-and-suffixes>

Definition

A **suffix** is a group of letters placed after the root of a word. For example, the word “flavorless” consists of the root word “flavor” combined with the suffix “-less” (which means “without”); the word “flavorless” means “having no flavor.”

<https://www.lexico.com/en/grammar/prefixes-and-suffixes>

Some prefixes and suffixes make very similar sounds but have different spellings.

Here are five pairs of prefixes and suffixes that are often mixed up.

	Examples
em- vs. en-	em body, em bark, em power, em brace en camp, en case, en able, en large
im- vs. in-	im proper, im pure, im polite, im partial in capable, in coherent, in comparable, in evitable
-er vs. -or	work er , read er , teach er , settl er doct or , assess or , profess or , invent or
-able vs. -ible	knowledg able , suit able , account able , dispos able imposs ible , incred ible , horrib le , respons ible
-tion vs. -sion	dominat ion , innovat ion , fict ion , format ion dimens ion , sess ion , intens ion , pens ion

6. Chunk words based on their syllables



Definition

A **syllable** is a part of a word that contains a single vowel sound, pronounced as a unit. For example, “book” has one syllable and “reading” has two syllables (read-ing).

<https://writingexplained.org/grammar-dictionary/syllable>

It will be easier to memorize the words and improve your spelling by chunking the words based on their syllables.

Examples:

- in-flu-en-tial
- path-o-lo-gic-al
- de-fend-er
- con-di-tion-al
- out-pour-ing
- hy-per-ten-sion
- o-ver-look
- su-prem-acy

7. Follow the three general spelling rules and their exceptions

I. Drop the last silent “e”

- Drop the last silent “e” when a suffix starting with a vowel is added to a word with a silent “e” at the end.

like → likable
come → coming

- Keep the last silent “e” when a suffix starting with a consonant is added to a word.

definite → definitely

- Keep the last “e” when a suffix is added to a word ending in *-ee*, *-ce*, or *-ge*.

flee → fleeing
notice → noticeable
outrage → outrageous

II. Change “y” to “i”

- Change “y” to “i” when a suffix is added to a word that ends in *-y* preceded by a consonant.

apply → applies
angry → angrily

- Keep “y” if the last “y” is preceded by a vowel.

obey → obeyed

- Keep “y” if the suffix *-ing* is added

try → trying

III. Double the last consonant

- a. Double the last consonant when a suffix is added to a word ending in a single consonant preceded by a single vowel.

get → getting

- b. Double the last consonant when the word has only one syllable or has the last syllable stressed.

fit → fitted

refer → referred

- c. Do not double the last consonant if it is preceded by another consonant.

relent → relenting

- d. Do not double the last consonant if it is preceded by more than one vowel.

fail → failed

- e. Do not double the last consonant if the word has more than one syllable and the last syllable is not stressed.

profit → profited

- f. Do not double the last consonant if a suffix starting with a vowel is added and adding the suffix changes the stress of the syllable.

prefer → preference

- g. Do not double the last consonant when adding a suffix that starts with a consonant.

equip → equipment

Practice Exercises

1. Fill in the blank with either *-ible* or *-able*.

The food is ined_____ or indigest_____.

2. Fill in the blank with either *-ible* or *-able*.

Last night's movie about the invis_____ man was so incred_____ that it was laugh_____.

3. Fill in the blank with either *em-* or *en-*.

The teacher _____ abled his students to creatively design the project by _____ powering them.

4. Fill in the blank with either *im-* or *in-*.

Any _____ proper or _____ polite behavior is _____ tolerable.

5. Fill in the blank with either *-er* or *-or*.

The teach_____ respects her former profess_____.

6. Fill in the blank with either *-tion* or *-sion*.

In the fic _____, the retiree lives on her pen_____.

7. Fill in the blank with either *affect* or *effect*.

Wars _____ everybody, and their destructive _____ last for generations.

8. Fill in the blank with either *rational* or *rationale*.

There is no _____ explanation for the _____ behind his behavior.

9. Fill in the blank with either *affluent* or *effluent*.

The chemical _____ is poisoning the river flowing through the _____ neighborhood.

10. Fill in the blank with either *finish* or *furnish*.

They plan to _____ the renovation to their apartment this month and will _____ it next month.

Answers

1. The food is **inedible** or **indigestible**.
2. Last night's movie about the **invisible** man was so **incredible** that it was **laughable**.
3. The teacher **enabled** his students to creatively design the project by **empowering** them.
4. Any **improper** or **impolite** behavior is **intolerable**.
5. The **teacher** respects his former **professor**.
6. In the **fiction**, the retiree lives on her **pension**.
7. Wars **affect** everybody, and their destructive **effects** last for generations.
8. There is no **rational** explanation for the **rationale** behind his behavior.
9. The chemical **effluent** is poisoning the river flowing through the **affluent** neighborhood.
10. They plan to **finish** the renovation to their apartment this month and will **furnish** it next month.

More resources for spelling

Spelling – Writing Centre, University of Ottawa

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/spelling>

Some tools and rules to improve your spelling – UofT Writing Advice

<http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/spelling/>

How to spell – Writing Centre, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

<https://ualr.edu/writingcenter/how-to-spell/>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops:

<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.