

How to study for a spelling bee

Start wherever you are: if you are having trouble with words such as *which* and *witch*, start there. If you have trouble with words such as *receive* or *accommodate*, start there. Work on your level of words until you are ready for the next. Your teacher may have word lists at various levels to help you figure out what level is right for you.

For words like *which* and *witch*, *receive* and *accommodate*, you just have to memorize how to spell them. They are like other words (*stitch*, *rich*, *itch*, *sandwich*, etc.), but there's no great secret. Quiz yourself, have other people quiz you, and use the words in your writing.

Reading is a great way to improve your spelling. Read frequently and look up the words you do not know in a dictionary, or ask someone what they mean. Try using words you have just learned in conversations.

Now, suppose you decide to do more than study words at your grade level and want to devote more time and energy to spelling bees: you want to try to win one. If you've been stung by the spelling bee and want to try to win a bee, there are some clear and important things you can do. The following will get you started on the path.

First, always remember that a spelling bee is a performance. You stand in front of other people and spell. Spelling, like speaking in front of others, makes some people nervous. So you need to practice. Find a friend or family member to be the pronouncer and answer all of your questions about the word. You can ask what it means, how you say it, what language it comes from, and what part of speech it is. Stand up and pretend you're in front of a microphone, ask your questions, and spell the word — just as if you were at a spelling bee. Maybe even get a bell for when you misspell.

Even when you know the word, it can be hard to spell it correctly. But what if you get a word you don't know? Every speller faces this challenge. You can prepare to make the best possible guess by studying patterns of words. Even if you don't recognize a word, you might be able to guess what patterns it fits into, which will help you make a better guess at how to spell it.

Start keeping lists of patterns. One of the easiest places to start noticing patterns is in Greek and Latin "roots." What's a "root"? It's a word or part of a word that is used to make new words. Notice that *telephone* starts with *tele-*? The Greek root *tele-* means "far." When the telephone was invented, it needed a name. So the inventor took a couple Greek roots and made up a name for it out of *tele* "at a distance, far" + *phone* "voice." Many of the most difficult words in English are made out of Greek and Latin roots, like *tele-* and *phone*.

You can find books that are all about roots of words. They generally have "roots," "word history," or "etymology" in their titles. Ask a librarian to help you, try your local bookstore, or look around online: there are many root resources. Also, most of the information about the root or roots of a word is found in a section of each word's dictionary entry called the "etymology" section. In a dictionary entry, the etymology appears after the pronunciation and part of speech, but before the definition.

Look for similar sounds, such as those in *television*, *telegraph*, and *telephone*. Each of those words was coined for a device which operated over a distance. Now suppose you are at a spelling bee. Even if you have never seen the word *telekinesis*, you at least know that it's a good guess that it starts with *tele-*. When you hear the definition and realize that there is indeed something to do with "distance," you have not just a good guess, but a really good guess about a word you have never seen before.

There are hundreds of Greek and Latin roots. Start collecting them, playing with them and seeing what sorts of words are built from them. All it takes is access to the Internet, a good dictionary, or an adult or fellow student who knows a few examples to get you started.

Start with words you know, such as *telephone*, *television*, *automobile*, or *computer*, and look them up. Find their roots. Then you might start to notice other words with the same roots, such as *autograph*, *autobiography*, *teleprompter*, *repute*, *mobility*, and *telepathy*. From there, you might be led to *teleological*, *telephony*, or even *teleroentgenogram*. Don't worry if some of those words seem too hard now: the point is that you should start with words you know and look for their roots in other words. Keep lists of words that contain each root.

Eventually, you will start to build up a whole network of roots that connect words together.

And you will start to notice that some words don't play by the rules: sometimes a root changes spelling or loses a letter. Keep special notes about these exceptions, for they are the sorts of words that can make a big difference for you in a spelling bee.

But root word study only works with words that come from Greek or Latin roots. Another way to notice patterns is to collect words that come from a particular language. For this you need to be able to read a big dictionary. In the dictionary, find the section that gives the history of words. There you will find, for example, that *muumuu*, *wiki*, *mahimahi*, and *aloha* all come from Hawaiian. If you have access to a computer-based version of a dictionary, you can search for "Hawaiian" in the etymology section of words. After you find a couple dozen more Hawaiian words, you may start to notice patterns. Start making lists of words that follow those patterns. You will also notice that Hawaiian words somehow just seem to follow some sort of pattern that you can't put your finger on. It's true. They do. And at that point, you will have a "feel" for Hawaiian words. I chose Hawaiian just as an example. There are many other languages that have given words to English: German, Italian, Hindi, Dutch, Quechua, Chinese, etc. Some of them have obvious patterns, some don't. You have to go exploring to find them. Always keep the weird words, for they can also make a big difference for you in a spelling bee.

Another way to look for patterns is to figure out all the ways a certain sound can be spelled in English and make lists. Pick a sound in a word, any sound, and then figure out the most common ways to spell that sound. For example, the sound of the letter z is sort of a buzzing sound, right? And it's mostly spelled with a z, right? What about that sound in *busy*? It's not a z. Now what about that sound in *Xerox*? Again, it's not a z. I'll tell you that words that come from Greek often spell that z-sound with an x, and that's why *Xerox* starts with a buzz that is not a z. There's a pattern! Again, keep lists of sounds that seem weird or interesting. Make lists of all the ways a given letter can be pronounced (or silent) as well as what letters can make each sound. See if you can find patterns (and words that go against those patterns).

“As with most big tasks, it's all about small steps.”

Remember that all the patterns have exceptions, and those exceptions can be asked in spelling bees so, along with the patterns, keep lists of any exceptions that you find. Sometimes the most interesting words follow no helpful pattern of words at all. For instance, look up the word WYSIWYG.

There is also a very important task you may want to try. See if you can learn those symbols that dictionaries use to indicate how words are pronounced. Start out by writing out the pronunciation symbols (called "diacritics") for some words you know how to pronounce, such as the words in this sentence. Lay them aside for a while, then pick them up later and see if you can figure out which words they are. There's a key to the symbols somewhere in most every dictionary which should help, too. Learning diacritics can be challenging, but it will help you correctly pronounce words you've never heard, and that will help when you get that weird word in a spelling bee.

To win a spelling bee at your school, you might have to really dig into your work. To win a spelling bee with spellers from several schools, you will have to dig in deeper. Start with whatever you know now and build from there. As with most big tasks, it's all about small steps. If you keep taking small steps toward better word knowledge, the biggest dictionary won't be big enough for you!

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