

Knowledge of the spelling system

In Phase Six children need to acquire more word-specific knowledge. They still need to segment words into phonemes to spell them, but they also learn that good spelling involves not only doing this and representing all the phonemes plausibly but also, where necessary, choosing the right grapheme from several possibilities.

In some cases, word-specific spellings (e.g. **sea/see**; **goal/pole/bowl/soul**; **zoo/clue/flew/you**) simply have to be learned. It is important to devote time in this phase to learning common words with rare or irregular spellings (e.g. **they, there, said**) as the quantity children write increases and without correction they may practise incorrect spellings that are later difficult to put right.

However, there are spelling conventions or guidelines that generalise across many words and that children should understand. Where there are exceptions these can usually be dealt with as they arise in children's reading and writing.

Some useful spelling guidelines

1. The position of a phoneme in a word may rule out certain graphemes for that phoneme. The **ai** and **oi** spellings do not occur at the end of English words or immediately before suffixes; instead, the **ay** and **oy** spellings are used in these positions (e.g. **play, played, playing, playful, joy, joyful, enjoying, enjoyment**). In other positions, the /ai/ sound is most often spelled **ai** or **a-**consonant-vowel, as in **rain, date** and **bacon**. The same principle applies in choosing between **oi** and **oy**: **oy** is used at the end of a word or immediately before a suffix, and **oi** is used elsewhere. There is no other spelling for this phoneme.

Note that it is recommended that teachers should (at least at first) simply pronounce the relevant vowel sounds for the children – /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/ and /u/; /ai/, /ee/, /igh/, /oa/ and /oo/. Later the terms 'long' and 'short' can be useful when children need to form more general concepts about spelling patterns.

2. When an /o/ sound follows a /w/ sound, it is frequently spelt with the letter **a** (e.g. **was, wallet, want, wash, watch, wander**) – often known as the 'w special'. This extends to many words where the /w/ sound comes from the **qu** grapheme (e.g. **quarrel, quantity, squad, squash**).
3. When an /ur/ sound follows the letter **w** (but not **qu**) it is usually spelt **or** (e.g. **word, worm, work, worship, worth**). The important exception is **were**.
4. An /or/ sound before an /l/ sound is frequently spelled with the letter /a/ (e.g. **all, ball, call, always**).