

Spelling Patterns Worth Teaching

English spelling is more predictable than its reputation. Most words follow patterns tied to sound, position and meaning. Teach these as patterns students can test, not rules to memorize.

Patterns that depend on position

FLOSS	At the end of a one-syllable word, right after a short vowel, double f, l and s, and often z. stuff, bell, pass, buzz. Exceptions: bus, gas, yes, if.
-ck or -k	At the end of a one-syllable word, /k/ right after a short vowel is spelled ck. After anything else, use k. back, duck, sick. But milk, desk, book, week.
c or k at the start	Use c before a, o and u. Use k before e, i and y. cat, cot, cut. But kept, kid, kite.
-tch or -ch	Right after a short vowel at the end of a one-syllable word, /ch/ is spelled tch. After a consonant or a vowel team, use ch. catch, fetch, pitch. But bench, coach. Exceptions: much, such, rich, which.
-dge or -ge	Right after a short vowel at the end of a word, /j/ is spelled dge. After anything else, use ge. badge, edge, bridge, judge. But cage, huge, large.
No final v or j	English words almost never end in v or j. Add an e after v. Use ge or dge for /j/. have, give, love, sleeve. cage, fudge.
Middle or end	Some vowel sounds have one spelling for the middle of a word and another for the end. ai / ay (rain, play). oi / oy (coin, boy). au / aw (haul, saw). ou / ow (out, cow).
Soft c and g	c and g usually say /s/ and /j/ before e, i or y. Before other letters they say /k/ and /g/. city, cent, cycle. gem, giant, gym. Exceptions for g: get, give, girl.

Patterns for adding suffixes

Doubling (1-1-1)	One syllable, one vowel, one final consonant: double that consonant before a suffix that starts with a vowel. Never double x or w. hop, hopping. run, runner. sad, saddest. But box, boxing. In longer words, double only when the last syllable is stressed: begin, beginning. But visit, visiting.
Drop the e	Drop a silent e before a suffix that starts with a vowel. Keep it before a suffix that starts with a consonant. make, making. hope, hoped. But hopeful, lately. Keep the e after soft c or g before a or o: noticeable, courageous.
Change y to i	When a word ends in a consonant plus y, change the y to i before most suffixes, but not before -ing. A vowel plus y keeps the y. cry, cried, crying. happy, happiness. play, played. joy, joyful.
-s or -es	Add -es when the base ends in s, x, z, ch or sh. You can hear the extra syllable. buses, boxes, buzzes, lunches, wishes.
Three sounds of -ed	-ed says /t/ after unvoiced sounds, /d/ after voiced sounds, and /ěd/ after t or d. It is always spelled -ed because it carries meaning: past tense. jumped /t/. played /d/. wanted, landed /ěd/.

When a word comes back misspelled, sort the error first

Type of error	Example	What to teach
A sound is missing	"stad" for stand	Segmenting. Have the student say each sound and tap it before writing.
Wrong spelling choice	"bak" for back	The position pattern. Here, -ck after a short vowel.
Suffix or base error	"jumpť" for jumped	Morphology. -ed is a meaning unit, spelled the same every time.

Patterns, not rules. Let students test them on real words and find the exceptions themselves.