

My spelling lets me down. Does it mean I'm dyslexic?

Dr Peter Levin

'We're expected to do a lot of writing, but my spelling lets me down. I get words wrong and it's very embarrassing. Does it mean I'm dyslexic?'

- A third-year undergraduate

What is meant by 'dyslexia'? The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) defines it as 'a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling'. The BDA adds: 'Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.'

What causes dyslexia? Research has identified physiological factors - non-normal structures and behaviour in a person's brain and eyes - that are associated with learning difficulties. It works both ways: as they develop during childhood, brain structures and behaviour are themselves influenced by the kind of language that we learn. In particular, they are different as between speakers of alphabetic languages, such as English and Italian, and those of the logographic languages, Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) and Japanese, that use characters which represent syllables rather than individual letters. Intriguingly, someone who is bilingual in, say, English and Japanese can be dyslexic in one but not the other. (More on dyslexia research can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

I can't tell you whether or not you have a physiological condition that qualifies as dyslexia and makes writing and reading unusually problematic for you, but I can tell you a number of things.

For English speakers one cause of difficulty in spelling words correctly is that English is not a phonetic language, so you can't work out how to spell a word from the sounds that you utter when you speak it.

Another causal factor is that in the latter half of the 20th century British schoolchildren were barely taught to spell. When I used to ask students what recollection they have of being taught to spell, nine times out of ten they responded by telling me about their memories not of being taught but of being *tested*.

For people who have difficulty with spelling, memories of childhood spelling tests are invariably traumatic. Sarcastic teachers, mocking or pitying schoolmates, inability to eat or sleep because of an impending test ... the spelling regime in many schools has been for a significant number of children a highly effective way not of teaching spelling but of installing a phobia about it! Ten, fifteen, twenty years on, you sit down to write, want to use a word that you're not sure how to spell, and immediately the phobia kicks in: you're hit by feelings of fear, incompetence and humiliation. Not a good bit of baggage to be carrying.

By the way, if you are one of those gifted people who think very quickly, whose minds ‘race’, you may spell words incorrectly for a reason that has nothing to do with a disability or inability. What’s happening is that as you are writing or typing a word, your mind is actually on the next word but ten (or thereabouts). You are liable to spell a word incorrectly simply because you are not paying attention to it. To deal with this, all you need do is make a point of carefully proofreading everything you write.

Many students who have difficulties with spelling and reckon themselves to be slow or very slow readers, jump to the conclusion that they have a dyslexic condition. They shouldn’t, and – if tempted – neither should you. Spelling has been badly taught in British schools probably since it was standardized in the eighteenth century, and everyone reads slowly when struggling with academic-speak for the first time. So the very last thing you should do is blame yourself for your difficulties.

What you should do

There is more than one way in which you can learn to spell a word. The most effective, in my experience, starts with seeing that word spelled correctly and takes you, via a series of steps, to the point where you can recollect accurately – without help – how to spell it for yourself. What you are recollecting is how the word looks, so you are visualizing it: seeing it ‘in your mind’s eye’, so to speak.

Visualizing is something that you can train yourself to do. Here’s an example. I have used it with students and the results have been wonderful to behold. I think the process probably works best if someone else takes you through it, but it’s perfectly feasible to do it on your own. I’m using the word ‘beautiful’, but when trying the exercise for yourself pick any word that causes you trouble: just take care that you begin with it spelled correctly!

Step 1. Look up your difficult word in a dictionary and write it down in large letters on a piece of A4 paper on its side (‘landscape’ mode), like this:

beautiful

Step 2. Split the word up into small chunks, in whatever way you find satisfactory, putting hyphens between the chunks, like this:

b-eau-ti-ful

Step 3. Now take some coloured markers and write it out once more (this is the last time), keeping the chunks, but using a different-coloured marker for each chunk and leaving out the hyphens:

b eau ti ful

Step 4. Relax! This is going to be fun. Hold this sheet of paper in front of you and look at the word for ten or fifteen seconds or so. Then turn it face down, look upwards – preferably towards a blank wall – and ‘see’ the word; picture it in your mind’s eye. You probably won’t see it correctly the first time: that doesn’t matter.

Step 5. After a few seconds of picturing the word, look down towards the sheet of paper again. Turn the sheet face up and look at the colourful word for ten or fifteen seconds once more: notice the chunks one by one, shifting your gaze consciously from left to right. Then again, as in Step 4, turn the sheet face down, look up at the blank wall and picture the word in your mind's eye. You might get a better result (many people do, especially if they are right-handed) if you're looking upwards and to the left rather than straight ahead.

Steps 6 to n (however many steps it takes). Repeat Step 5 a few times. What will happen after a few repetitions is that your mental picture and the actual colourful word on the page become 'synchronized': you won't need to consciously check whether they are the same; you just know they are. At this point in the process people invariably relax: the tension visibly leaves their bodies, their shoulders drop, they often flop in their chair and smile.

Step n+1. Without looking at any of the pieces of paper you've used up to now, take a clean piece of paper, look upwards and see the word in your mind's eye, and – without taking time to think – write down the word. Now check it against one of your previous versions to see if it's correct. If it is, congratulate yourself! If you've got it wrong, take a breather and then repeat Step 5 a few more times.

If there's someone with you, they can help. They should ask you to place the sheet of paper face down, look upwards and see the word in your mind's eye, and read aloud the letters of the word. If you've got it wrong, they'll tell you. In that case, again, take a breather and then repeat the process.

Step n+2. Without looking at any of the pieces of paper you've used up to now, take a fresh piece of paper, look upwards and see the word in your mind's eye, and – again without taking time to think – write down the letters of the word **in reverse order**, i.e. starting with the last and working backwards. Now check what you've written against the correct version to see if your reverse-order spelling is correct. If it is, congratulate yourself again! (If you've got it wrong, take a breather and again repeat Step 5 a few more times.)

If you've got the reverse-order spelling correct, that is the absolute clincher. You can only have done that by 'seeing' the word in your mind's eye, i.e. by visualizing it.

Finally, I emphasize here the 'doing without thinking' for this reason: students in higher education are liable to make a mess of the visualizing process because they are trying to think at the same time. They try to memorize the word as they would a poem, or they invent little word games. I know someone who can manage the correct spelling of 'predilection' (as opposed to 'predeliction') only by reminding himself that it is an 'Old Macdonald' word: the vowels go e-i-e-i-o. If you are inventing such word games when you are trying the above exercise, it will interfere with your ability to visualize. If you catch yourself doing it, stop!

The above method is derived from *The NLP Spelling Strategy* by Robert Dilts. It is available [here](#).
