

How to Evaluate a Spelling Program

This checklist looks at ten things that *don't* work when teaching spelling and eleven things that *do* work for most kids.

10 Things That Do **NOT** Work

- Relying on time wasters and page fillers**
Workbooks filled with activities like crossword puzzles, word searches, and writing the spelling words 10 times waste valuable teaching and learning time.
- Teaching “rules” that aren’t true**
For example, many kids are taught that “*When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking.*” But did you know that there are actually more words that don’t follow this “rule” than words that do?
- Relying *only* on visual strategies (or *only* on phonics)**
There are *four important spelling strategies* (phonetic, rule-based, visual, and morphemic), but the vast majority of spelling programs ignore three out of the four strategies.
- Teaching all the spellings of a sound at the same time**
For example, the sound of long A can be spelled A, AI, AY, EY, EIGH, EA, and more. It’s overwhelming to attempt to learn all the possible spellings at once.
- Teaching spelling as part of the reading program**
Instead of being taught as its own subject, spelling is often tucked in as part of the reading program alongside grammar and writing. Since most kids learn to read more quickly than they learn to spell, it is important to *teach the subjects independently*.
- Teaching blends as separate units**
Some examples of consonant blends are STR, PL, SM, THR, and BR. If a child is taught the basic phonograms, he can segment words and easily spell the blends by *sounding them out*.
- Relying on copywork to teach spelling**
Copywork is good for many things (such as improving handwriting and internalizing grammar and style), but it *lacks the direct spelling instruction* that many children need.
- Ignoring the need for review**
If there is no *consistent review*, a student will forget a large part of what he is taught, which is frustrating for you *and* your child.
- Assigning lists of random, unconnected words**
Random word lists actually *prevent* many kids from learning to spell. Here are examples of *spelling lists that don’t support learning*.
- Skipping spelling instruction altogether**
More and more schools are choosing not to teach spelling. It’s not your child’s fault if he can’t spell if he hasn’t even been given a chance!



If the program you're evaluating meets the criteria on the list below, you can be confident that it will work for your child!

11 Things That **DO** Work

- Teaching through direct instruction**
Your student should be told explicitly what he needs to know, following a [logical order of instruction](#). He should not have to guess or figure out patterns on his own.
- Lessons that are incremental and sequential**
The program should start with the most basic spelling skills and [gradually build upon skills the child has mastered](#), step by step.
- Lessons that incorporate multisensory learning**
In [multisensory learning](#), the student learns through all the major avenues to the brain at the same time. Multisensory learning will help your child learn more and allow her to succeed.
- Teaching phonograms**
[Phonograms](#) (letters and letter combinations such as SH, CK, and AY) are the building blocks of almost every word. When your student knows the phonograms and a manageable number of spelling rules, he can spell the vast majority of English words.
- Teaching spelling rules**
[Spelling rules](#) show the patterns and logic of the English language. When the rules that govern the majority of words are known, the exceptions become clear and easier to learn.
- Lessons that teach the different syllable types**
Spelling becomes much easier when students can recognize the [six basic syllable types](#) in words. Start by teaching closed syllables first.
- Continual review that helps make spelling stick**
It only takes two minutes a day to [review previously learned rules and words](#), but the long-term benefits are well worth the effort.
- Lessons that incorporate dictation exercises**
Many children can write their spelling words during a lesson, but they often misspell those same words outside of lesson time. [Dictation exercises](#) allow your student to use his new knowledge in a practical situation, promoting better spelling.
- A mastery-based approach**
A [mastery-based program](#) provides a foundation for long-term learning by placing your child according to ability rather than age or grade. A mastery-based program moves children to the next level only when they have mastered the current level, ensuring that there are no gaps in learning.
- Teaching reading and spelling separately**
When [reading and spelling are taught separately](#), your child can progress as quickly as possible in reading (which is easier for most kids) but take as much time as she needs in spelling.
- Lesson plans that are easy to follow**
You have enough to do without trying to figure out how or what to teach! Make sure that the [lesson plans are clear](#) so that your attention can be on your student instead of on what to do next.