GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS
Overview of Spelling

Spelling represents a challenge for both native and nonnative speakers of English and is learned from a combination of repeated experience and memorization. Although there are some rules to follow, there are many cases where rules don't apply, and there are often exceptions to the rules themselves.

The best advice to improve your spelling: familiarize yourself with the basic spelling rules; keep a list of problematic words; and if you're not sure how a word is spelled, look it up in the dictionary.

Many words in English vocabulary come from a variety of languages including Old English, Ancient Greek, Latin, and French, among others. Because of this, English words like **physics**, **pneumonia**, and **pizza** aren't spelled the way they are pronounced.

English is also famous for silent letters. Some English words with silent letters include **knight**, **right**, **gnaw** and **night**.

Often the way we "say" a word is different from how the word is spelled when it is written. It is common when speaking not to pronounce every sound in some words. For example, the word **recognize** may be pronounced "recogniz" or **library** may be pronounced "libery." However, when written these words must be spelled correctly.

Another cause of spelling errors in English is **homonyms**: words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings and spellings. Some examples are **principle/principal, write/right, know/no, accept/except**.

The same problem often occurs with words that are not "exact" homonyms, but that are similar in sound. For example: **except/expect, suppose/supposed, formerly/formally.**

The problem of spelling can be compounded for people whose first language is not English. Words in English may be similar to words of Spanish, French, Italian, or German, but the rules of spelling are often different. For example, many words that begin with "**es-**" in Spanish, begin with "**s-**" in English, for example: **special.**

Also, unlike in some languages, the same sound may have several possible spellings in English. For example, the sound **[i]** pronounced **ee,** may be spelled any of the following ways:

e	as in **complete**
ee	as in **feet**
ea	as in **read**
ei	as in **receive**
ie	as in **piece**
y	as in **happy**

As noted above, the best thing to do is to keep a list of words that you misspell. It may be helpful to try to analyze them for the types of errors you make most often. The rules outlined below may help you in some cases, but often you will simply have to memorize and practice. To aid memorization, try **reading**, **saying**, and **writing** each word several times.

SPELLING RULES

- *i* **before** *e* **except after** *c*

If you learn this short poem, you will be able to spell many hard-to-spell words correctly:

> Write *i* before *e*
> except after *c*
> or when sounding like *a*
> as in n*ei*ghbor and w*ei*gh.

Does this rule apply all the time? No, there are exceptions, but it does work most of the time for many of the words you use on a daily basis. Now, let's examine the parts of the rule.

Write i before e

Examples	believe	piece	priest

except after c

	receive	deceive	receipt

or when sounding like *a*
as in n*ei*ghbor and w*ei*gh.

	reign	feint	freight

Exceptions

The rule applies only when the *ei/ie* cluster is pronounced as one syllable; it does not apply when the letters are divided between two syllables, as in **deity** and **science**.

If the word is borrowed from a foreign language, then the rule may not be applicable; examples are **sheik** and **reichsmark**.

Some words simply don't follow the rule; examples are **heir, height, weird**.

The following is a list of some additional exceptions to this rule.

ancient	financier	seize
caffeine	leisure	sleight
codeine	neither	species
counterfeit	prescience	stein
either	protein	surfeit
Fahrenheit	reveille	their

- **drop the final silent *e***

This rule concerns words that end in a silent *e*, such as **make** and **argue**. When a suffix is added to a word ending in a silent *e*, drop the *e* if the suffix begins with a vowel, for example "**-ing**," "**-ile**"; keep the **e** if the suffix begins with a consonant, for example, "**-ment**," "**-ly**," "**-ful**."

Examples	**word**	+	**suffix**	=	**new word**
	serve	+	-ile	=	servile
	page	+	-ing	=	paging
	educate	+	-ing	=	educating
	rampage	+	-ed	=	rampaged
	time	+	-ly	=	timely
	atone	+	-ment	=	atonement
Exceptions	argue	+	-ment	=	argument
	due	+	-ly	=	duly
	intervene	+	-tion	=	intervention
	judge	+	-ment	=	judgement
	true	+	-ly	=	truly
	canoe	+	-ing	=	canoeing
	convene	+	-tion	=	convention

- **changing *y* to *i***

This rule applies when you add a suffix to a word that ends in *y*. Change *y* to *i* before a suffix when the *y* is preceded by a consonant; for example, app**ly** + -ance = app**li**ance. However, do not change *y* to *i* when the *y* is preceded by a vowel; for example, p**ay** + -s = p**ay**s.

Examples	**word**	+	**suffix**	=	**new word**
	flab<u>by</u>	+	-est	=	flabbiest
	la<u>zy</u>	+	-er	=	lazier
	byw<u>ay</u>	+	-s	=	byways
	pr<u>ay</u>	+	-ed	=	prayed

Exceptions

If the suffix itself begins with an *i*, as in "**-ing**" or "**-ine**," then do not change the *y* to *i* before adding the suffix.

Examples	word	+	suffix	=	new word
	fry	+	-ing	=	frying
	marry	+	-ing	=	marrying
	worry	+	-ing	=	worrying

Certain irregular verbs have exceptions to this rule in their past tense form. You can memorize the irregular past-tense pattern of these three verbs: pay/paid, say/said, lay/laid.

- **doubling the final consonant**

This rule is very useful, but it is a bit more complicated than the previous ones. You may find it a bit confusing, yet the rule is worth studying, because it explains why there are two "**r's**" in **preferred**, but only one in **preference**. The rule for doubling a final consonant has three parts.

A final consonant may only be doubled before a suffix beginning with a vowel; e.g., **-ed**, **-ing**.

The final consonant must be preceded by a single vowel, e.g., g**et** + -ing = ge**tt**ing, but gr**eet** + -ing = gree**t**ing.

The base word must either be only one syllable, sit, stop, spit <u>or</u> it must have an accent on the final syllable when the suffix has been added, beg**in**ning, occurrence, but not **ref**erence, or de**vel**opment. An accented syllable is one that is emphasized or is the loudest one you hear.

Examples: double the consonant

mop	+	-ing	=	mopping
begin	+	-ing	=	beginning
submit	+	-ed	=	submitted
tan	+	-ing	=	tanning

Examples: do not double the consonant

jump	+	-ed	=	jumped
develop	+	-ing	=	developing
prefer	+	-ence	=	preference

The above rules may be helpful in some situations, that is, assuming you can remember all the parts of each rule as well as all the exceptions. Finally, English spelling is a complex, challenging, and even chaotic system. Your surest resources have to be a good memory and a good dictionary.