

## SPELLING INVENTORY

Most English instructors consider the developmental students' misspelling to be the least of their problems. However, measurable improvement in that surface feature of writing frequently serves as a catalyst for success in other areas of the composition process. The student who learns to attend to the comparatively easy-to-spot spelling error can learn to do systematic, critical proofreading for grammatical errors such as verb forms. The method below helps students spot orthographic errors quickly and successfully, by limiting the error hunt to a manageable task. This method also acquaints developmental students with the editing process, for it incorporates close attention to detail, identification of the error, analysis of the problem, and correction.

Mere identification of countless spelling errors rarely helps developmental students improve the quality of their work. William Irmscher and Mina Shaughnessy tell us that even the worst spellers have trouble with only five to seven of the numerous orthographic patterns that comprise the formal written code. Thus, English instructors can avoid burdening students with reams of rules to memorize in order to identify misspellings, concentrating instead on students' individual needs. Those students who, for example, have no trouble with certain vowel combinations or consonantal clusters can skip needless exercises and tests. Naturally, however, early diagnosis of the students' individual patterns is critical in time-poor developmental English courses. A system for helping students quickly discover their misspelling patterns is crucial.

Shaughnessy's diagnostic form in *Errors and Expectations* works well in the hands of professional tutors who have regular contact with self-motivated students such as in Muriel Harris's writing lab at Purdue University. However, for teachers in colleges with inadequate, understaffed, or underfunded learning assistance centers, or in colleges with students unable or unlikely to commit themselves to regular sessions with tutors, Shaughnessy's forms need adapting.

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For the instructor, who alone faces a morass of language errors, and who lacks the time to inventory the individual spelling patterns of every student, the simplified inventory form (Figure 1) that I use in my course and lab hours at Greater Hartford Community College might be some help. Basic to this form's simplicity is the observation that all spelling errors are one (or more) of four graphic irregularities: added letters, dropped letters, shuffled letters, or substituted letters (by an extension of definition this last category includes homonyms). This easy breakdown does not overwhelm students with a barrage of complex phonetic rules as they do the initial recording of their own errors and as they categorize errors previously circled or marked by their instructor. Not only, then, do the students handle the paperwork of recording; but they also, in confronting their errors, become actively involved in identifying and categorizing their misspelling patterns.

And, I have discovered, the more the students are involved in the analysis of their own misspelling patterns, the stronger their commitment to correction becomes. Analysis can be simplified for the student, with the result of the analysis as, or more, productive.

Below (Fig. 1) is the diagnostic form I use:

Although each instructor will handle the inventorying in a manner consistent with his or her relationship with the class, student involvement in the process is critical to their success. Once the students are involved, they participate in their own learning; they are not recipients of chastisement.

After the first three weeks of the term, I hand the students their folders and ask them to copy each marked misspelling—as it is—under the appropriate category on the inventory that I hand out. Of course, at this time I do not expect them to spot misspellings that I have not marked, so I have several written assignments meticulously corrected. They check with sources—including other classmates, me, and the dictionary—for the correct spelling of the word. As they fill in the chart, I ask them to date their errors according to the original assignment. At the end of the term they invariably witness the decrease in the number of their misspellings.

Individual conferences are an important aspect of the analysis task. I schedule the first student/instructor conferences for shortly after the classroom inventorying assignment. Students commonly arrive at the first conferences and announce that all of their problems have to do with *e*'s or with double consonants, or *y* substitutions.

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#### HIGHLIGHTS JBW SPRING 1986

*Bartholomae-Inventing the University; Kogen-The Conventions of Expository Writing; Brookes-A Dean's Dilemmas; Jensen-The Reification of the Basic Writer; Sternglass-Commitment to Writing & Complexity of Thinking; Purves-Rhetorical Communities, the International Student and Basic Writing; Lunsford-Assignments for Basic Writers: Unresolved Issues and Needed Research.*

Figure 1

Sample Data Sheet for Student Inventory of  
Personal Spelling Errors

SPELLING INVENTORY

Directions: First, look at the words circled on your papers; then, ask a classmate or consult a dictionary for standard spellings. Now try to decide what caused the error. Are there added, dropped, shuffled, or substituted letters? Record the words in the appropriate space, giving the date the mistake was made. Words about which you are unsure, put in space below category V. We will analyze them together in conference.

<b>I. ADDS</b> (Misspelling caused by added letters) 9/30 toled (told) 10/12 soled (sold)
<b>II. DROPS</b> (Misspelling caused by dropped letters) 9/30 totaly (totaly) 10/12 an (and) 10/12 agan (again)
<b>III. SHUFFLES</b> (Misspelling caused by transposed letters) 9/30 recieve (receive) 10/12 trian (train)
<b>IV. SUBS</b> (Misspelling caused by substitutions,* including homonyms) 9/30 studys (studies) 9/30 there (their*)
<b>V. UNIDENTIFIES</b> (Cause of misspelling uncertain)

In one-on-one conferences, the students analyze their own work more freely. Without peers around, there is no threat of ridicule and embarrassment. At this time, I take the students' inventories, have them write out the correct spellings of any words as yet uncorrected, help them sense patterns they might not have the expertise to discover (particularly for English-as-a-second language speakers in the regular developmental classes). After recognizing the patterns, the students are acclimated to doing specialized exercises that pertain to their immediate problems. (The back sections of Mary Whitten's *Creative Pattern Practice*, [Harcourt, 1966] and certain parts of Allen Meyer's *Writing with Confidence*, [Scott Foresman 1983] are good starts.) With one student, for example, I discovered that a serious pattern was his tendency to insert an *e* between final consonant clusters (the same result occurred sometimes by transposition) as in toled, soled, beatels, and tabel—told, sold, beatles, and table.

Having the students do specialized exercises personalizes (perhaps thus makes significant) the therapy. Having the students make up individual spelling cue-cards extends this process and introduces a useful technique for other proofreading problems. After these conferences, in later writing assignments, I ask the students to proofread for spelling errors. They take out their inventories or special index cards with their "cues" written on them, and check over their paragraphs or papers for any misspelled words. Because they have become sensitized to "types" of problems—limited in number—their task is simpler. It's no longer a matter of "looking up every word in the dictionary." Instead, they look for their problem patterns and apply their personalized remedies. Eventually, they begin spotting the errors without the prompt of the inventories.

The improvement in spelling is often astonishing. I have watched students go from misspelling every third or fourth word to only three or four misspellings in two pages of writing. I have overheard adult learners telling classmates to reread their papers for "subs," "adds," and "shuffles." Also, as students increase their written vocabularies, they can troubleshoot those patterns that previously gave them difficulty. They don't as often avoid using longer words through fear of misspelling.

Instructors should be prepared to find, however, that the students' process of translating the pattern recognition to their own writing follows the usual two steps: initial hypercorrection (changing all words that incorporate the pattern) followed by eventual discrimination between words that need to be changed and those that do not.

This identification, analysis, and correction process needs to occur early in the term. Although to effect it requires extra planning and time at the term's inception, the payoff is in the students' awareness of and attention to detail in their work. The four deliberate steps of marking a number of writing assignments for all spelling errors, taking classroom time for inventorying assignments, scheduling conferences with each student, and analyzing and suggesting correctives reinforce the instructor's diagnostic role and the students' responsibility for their own writing.