

General Spelling Rules in English

The English language combines words from many different languages, and they do not always look the way they sound. If you know another language, such as Spanish, French, Greek, or Latin, that will help you spell in English because many English words are derived from those languages. It will also help you practice spelling correctly, just like you must practice increasing your vocabulary. When you learn a new word, concentrate not only on what it means, but how to spell it. There are also many rules to help you spell, and almost as many exceptions. Knowing the rules will help you when you write a word that you are not sure how to spell.

ie vs. ei

When the *ie* combination sounds like long *e* (*ee*), the rule is: *i* before *e* except after *c*.
(belief, fierce, cashier, fiend, wield, yield, series, chief, achieve, niece, hygiene, relieve)

Exceptions: The *ie* combination comes after *c* when it sounds like *sh* or *sy*.
(deficient, conscience, omniscient, ancient, society, science)

When the combination of *e* and *i* sounds like *ay*, the rule is: *e* before *i*.
(neighbour, weigh, eight, feint, freight, reign, sleigh, surveillance, veil, vein, weight, skein)

Exceptions: Sometimes the combination of *e* and *i* sounds like *ee*.
(either, weird, seizure, sheik, leisure, seize)

Sometimes the combination of *e* and *i* sounds like long *i*.
(height, sleight, stein, seismology)

Sometimes the combination of *e* and *i* sounds like short *e*.
(their, heifer, foreign, forfeit)

Vowel Combinations

When two vowels are together, the first one is usually long and the second one is silent.
(reach, cheapen, conceal, caffeine, paisley, abstain, acquaint, juice, nuisance, buoy)

Exceptions: Sometimes the pair *ai* makes an *uh* sound.
(Britain, porcelain, fountain, villain, curtain, certain, captain, chieftain)

Sometimes you pronounce both parts of the vowel pair *ia*.
(civilian, brilliant, alleviate, familiar, genial, congenial, menial, guardian)

Sometimes *ia* are combined with *t* or *c* to make a *sh* sound.
(artificial, glacial, beneficial, martial, commercial)

Consonants

The English language uses silent consonants. Silent consonants do not follow a general rule. The best way to learn these words is by sight.

(answer, autumn, calm, debt, ghost, gnarled, gnaw, indict, kneel, knight, know, knowledge, often, subtle, blight, pseudonym, psychology, rhetorical, thorough, through, write)

Doubling Consonants

Consonants are usually doubled when adding an ending, or *suffix*, to a word.

When the suffix begins with a vowel (such as *-ed*, *-ing*, *-ance*, *-ence*, or *-ant*) and the word ends with one vowel and one consonant, double the last consonant.

Cut becomes *cutter* or *cutting*.

Slip becomes *slipping* or *slipped*.

Quit becomes *quitter* or *quitting*.

When the final consonant of the word is accented and there is only one consonant in the last syllable, double the final consonant.

Commit becomes *committing* or *committed*.

Defer becomes *deferring* or *deferred*.

Prefer becomes *preferring* or *preferred*.

When the suffix begins with a consonant, keep the final *n* when adding *-ness* and keep the final *l* when adding *-ly*.

Mean becomes *meanness*.

Lean becomes *leanness*.

Legal becomes *legally*.

Formal becomes *formally*.

The Exceptions: *Draw* becomes *drawing*. *Bus* becomes *buses*. *Chagrin* becomes *chagrined*.

Final Y

When adding a suffix, a final *y* is sometimes changed to an *i*.

When you add a suffix to a word ending in *y*, keep the *y* if it follows a vowel.

(attorneys, chimneys, monkeys, keys, stayed, delayed, played, relayed, playing, relaying, staying, saying, annoyance, conveyance, employable, playable)

The Exceptions: *say* becomes *said*, *money* becomes *monies*, *day* becomes *daily*

When you add a suffix to a word ending in *y*, change the *y* to an *i* if it follows a consonant.

Mercy becomes *merciful*.

Pity becomes *pitiful*.

Beauty becomes *beautiful*.

Busy becomes *business*.

Crazy becomes *craziness*.

Lazy becomes *laziness*.

Angry becomes *angrily*.

Busy becomes *busily*.

Healthy becomes *healthily*.

Salary becomes *salaries*.

Busy becomes *busies*.

Flurry becomes *flurries*.

The Exceptions: When you add *-ing*, keep the final *y*.

Copy becomes *copying*. *Busy* becomes *busying*. *Study* becomes *studying*.

(Smith, Brady. *Proofreading, Revising, and Editing Skills Success*, New York: LearningExpress, LLC, 2003.)