

# **Discovering the Sense in English Spelling:** *The Foundation of Literacy for Every Student*

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**The English Spelling SYSTEM  
is Completely Logical and Predictable**

But...

sign

sine

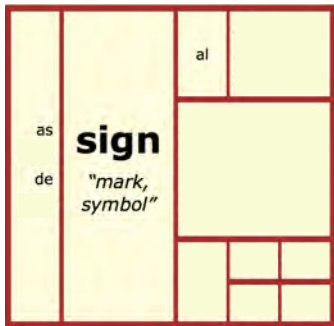
aisle		bait		bred		
isle		bate		bread		ball
	aye					bawl
	I		bail			
	eye		bale			
be		bear		acts		all
bee		bare		axe		awl
			ate			
			eight	by		air
	bough			bye		ere
blew	bow	break		buy		
blue		brake			bore	
					boar	

**The English Spelling SYSTEM  
is Completely Logical and Predictable**

- Words Make Sense in Families
- *Structure* is the first consideration
- *Relationships* are the second consideration
- We can understand the way that *pronunciation* is represented in the context of structure & relationships

## Words Make Sense in Families

### Why is there a letter <g> in sign?



sign + al → signal  
de + sign → design  
as + sign → assign

Why is there an <s> in <design>?

Why are there two <s>'s in <assign>?

## These are real relationships

**sign (n.)**  
early 13c., "gesture or motion of the hand," especially one meant to communicate something, from Old French *signe* "sign, mark," from Latin *signum* "identifying mark, token, indication, symbol; proof; military standard, ensign; a signal, an omen; sign in the heavens, constellation," according to Watkins, literally "standard that one follows," from PIE *\*seku-no-*, from root *\*seku-* (1) "to follow."

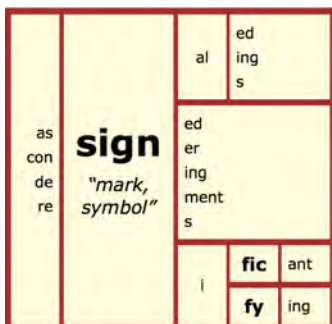
**signal (n.)**  
late 14c., "visible sign, indication," from Old French *signal*, *seignal* "seal, imprint, sign, mark," from Medieval Latin *signale* "a signal," from Late Latin *signalis* (adj.) "used as a signal, pertaining to a sign," from Latin *signum* "identifying mark, sign" (see *sign* (n.)). Restricted sense "agreed-upon sign (to commence or desist, etc.)" is from 1590s. Meaning "modulation of an electric current" is from 1855.

**assign (v.)**  
c. 1300, "to transfer, convey, bequeath (property); appoint (to someone a task to be done); order, direct (someone to do something); fix, settle, determine; appoint or set (a time); indicate, point out," from Old French *assigner* "assign, set (a date, etc.); appoint legally; allot" (13c.), from Latin *assignare/assignare* "to mark out, to allot by sign, assign, award," from *ad* "to" (see *ad-*) + *signare* "make a sign," from *signum* "identifying mark, sign" (see *sign* (n.)). Original use was in legal transferences of personal property. Related: *Assigned*; *assigning*.

**design (v.)**  
1540s, from Latin *designare* "mark out, devise, choose, designate, appoint," from *de-* "out" (see *de-*) + *signare* "to mark," from *signum* "identifying mark, sign" (see *sign* (n.)). Originally in English with the meaning now attached to *designate*; many modern uses of *design* are metaphorical extensions. Related: *Designed*; *designing*.

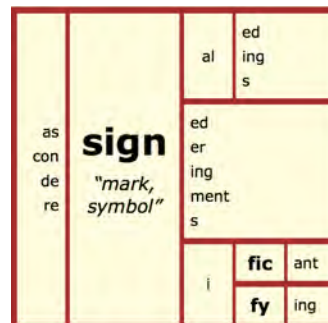
source: etymonline.com

## Words Make Sense in Families



sign + i + fy → signify  
sign + i + fic + ant → significant  
con + sign + ment → consignment  
as + sign + ment → assignment  
de + sign + er → designer  
re + sign + ed → resigned

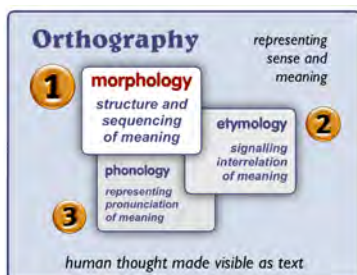
## Words Make Sense in Families



So, why is <sign> not just spelled <sine>?

Written English words are made up of units of meaning that are spelled consistently **even when pronunciation shifts**.

## Our Spelling System is Logical and Predictable



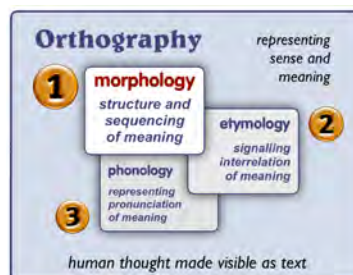
*IF* we study:

1. a word's **morphology**  
(units of meaning)

design → de + sign  
signal → sign + al

Source: realspelling.fr

## Our Spelling System is Logical and Predictable



*IF* we study:

1. a word's **morphology**  
(units of meaning)

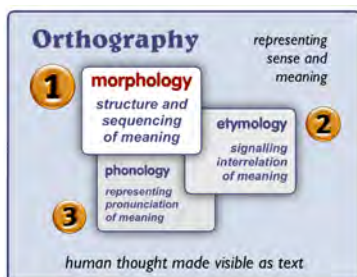
2. its **etymology**  
(relationship to other words)

- diachronically "through time:"  
from Latin signum "identifying  
mark, sign"

- synchronically "same time:"  
<signal, sign, designate>

Source: realspelling.fr

## Our Spelling System is Logical and Predictable



*IF* we study:

1. a word's **morphology**  
(units of meaning)

2. its **etymology**  
(relationship to other words)

and *only then* analyze

3. its **orthographic  
phonology**

/z/ in <design> is spelled <s>  
<i> in BASE <sign> can be  
"long, short or schwaed"

Source: realspelling.fr

Go to film through E convention

con	<b>fine</b> "end, limit"	al	ish
de		ite	ly
in			

Source: American Oxford Dictionary  
and etymonline.com  
from Latin *finis*

fine/ + al → final  
con + fine → confine

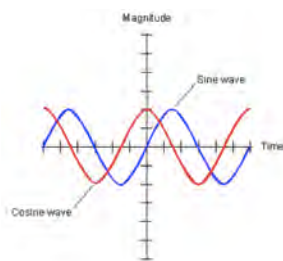
fine/ + ite → finite  
in + fine/ + ite → infinite  
in + fine/ + ite/ + y → infinity

fine/ + ish → finish  
de + fine/ + ite + ly → definitely

fine	finalize	financing
final	finalist	refinance
finally	finals	refinancing
define	finish	financial
defined	finished	financially
defines	finishing	confine
defining	unfinished	confinement
definite	refine	confined
definitely	refinement	confining
redefine	refinements	finite
indefinable	refiners	infinite
indefinite	refinery	infinitely
indefinitely	finance	infinity
definition	financed	infinite
definitions		

con	in	re	un	<b>fine</b> "end, limit"	al	ist	ize	ly	s
					ance	ed	es	ing	
in	re	de			ed	ly	s		
				er	s	y			
					ish	ed	ing		
						ion	s		
					ite	ive	ly	s	
						ly	y		
						ment	s		

co	<b>sine</b> "bend, fold, curve"	u	ate
in		ous	ly
		us	es
			itis
			oid



Source: whatsaexchange.com

co + sine → cosine  
sine/ + us → sinus



Source: sinuses.com

Source: Oxford American  
Dictionary  
from Latin *sinus*

co	<b>sine</b> "bend, fold, curve"	u	ate
in		ous	ly
		us	es
			itis
			oid

**sinuous** | 'sɪnjuəs |

adjective

having many curves and turns: *the river follows a sinuous trail through the forest.*

• lithe and supple: *the sinuous grace of a cat.*

DERIVATIVES

**sinuously** | 'sɪnjuəsli | adverb

**sinuousness** noun

ORIGIN

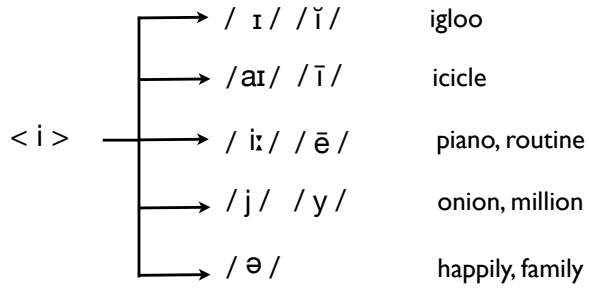
late 16th century: from French *sinueux* or Latin *sinuosus*, from *sinus* 'a bend.'

Source: Apple dictionary

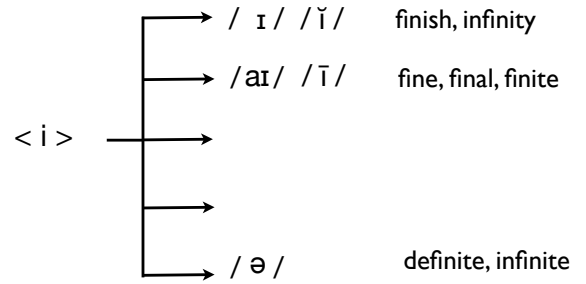
co + sine → cosine  
sine/ + us → sinus

sine/ + u + ous → sinuous  
in + sine/ + u + ate → insinuate

Traditional - abstract



Concrete!



Go to film through Doubling convention

A student was misspelling <supper> as

\*<super>

**Except....**

habit	study	frolic	livid
magic	cabin	given	logic
manor	finish	honest	rapid
medal	driven	civic	panic
metal	damage	comic	punish
pedal	dragon	gavel	seven
melon	edit	having	rapid
never	risen	leper	rebel
novel	engine	limit	rigor
panel	robin	salad	etc, etc, etc...

\*<super>

sup<sup>p</sup> + er → supper  
soup

Study words starting  
with something that works  
every time.

Start with *structure* and *relationships*.

Words that we think of as simple can actually be complex:

sup + er → supper  
fun + y → funny  
slip + er → slipper  
hap + y → happy



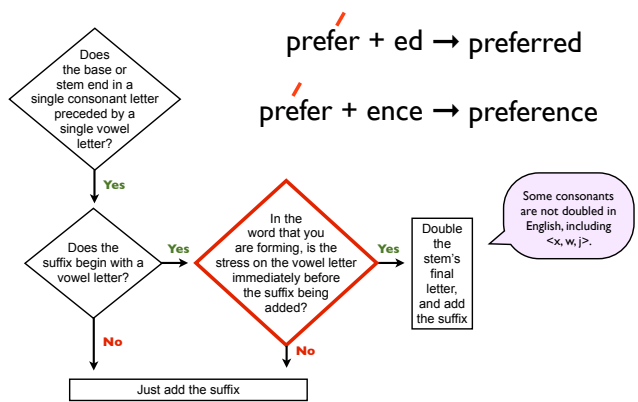
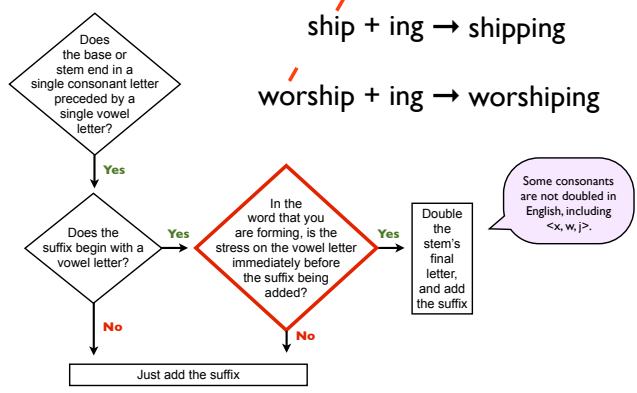
hap + y → happy  
hap + en → happen

mishap  
haphazard  
hapless

*Enhances Spelling & Reading  
Develops Vocabulary*

The **STRUCTURES** of English words  
are completely consistent

mis | hap | en  
y



ad	able	ad + mit → admit
e	al	e + mit → emit
inter	ed	o + mit → omit
o	s	per + mit → permit
per	ance	sub + mit → submit
sub	es	trans + mit → transmit
trans	ee	com + mit → commit
non	s	re + mit → remit
sub	ent	
com	ing	
un	ly	

mit  
"send"

com + mit + ee → committee  
com + mit + ment → commitment  
per + mit + ed → permitted  
inter + mit + ent + ly → intermittently



com + mit + ee → **committee**

- Two <m>'s (not "double <m>") from two separate elements
- Doubled <t> is result of doubling convention
- Double <e> is a vowel digraph

Rather than a series of letters to memorize, structure and conventions allow this word to make sense.

Go to film through Y convention

un	<b>hap</b> "chance, fortune"	y	er
mis		en	est
		less	ly
		ness	ness
		s	ing
		ed	ed
		ly	
		<b>hazard</b>	

happy + er → happier  
happy + ness → happiness

re	<b>try</b> "pick out, sift"	<b>out</b>	
		al	s
		ed	
		er	
		es	
		ing	

try + al → trial  
try + ed → tried  
try + ing → trying  
try + out → tryout

fried → fry + ed  
cried → cry + ed  
spied → spy + ed

We want students to see  
structure to understand words

happiness → happy + ness  
readiness → ready + ness  
denial → deny + al  
easier → easy + er  
slipperiest → slippery + est  
emptiest → empty + est

heavily → heavy + ly  
steadily → steady + ly

colonial → colony + al  
remedial → remedy + al

We want students to see  
structure to understand words

slipperiest → slippery + est  
slipperiest → slipper + y + est  
slipperiest → slip + er + y + est

But isn't morphology and  
etymology too advanced for  
young students?

**Week 15: Weed Is a Flower**

sooner	smaller
soonest	smallest
hotter	fatter
hottest	fattest
busier	angrier
busiest	angriest
happier	straighter
happiest	straightest

**From Scott Foresman Reading Street  
mid 2nd grade spelling words**

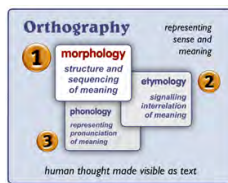
happy → hap + y (happen)  
instead → in + stead (steady)  
question → quest + ion (request)  
because → be + cause (excuse)  
nothing → no + thing  
animal → anim + al (animation)  
today → to + day  
tomorrow → to + morrow (morning)  
toward → to + ward (forward, onward, inward, upward)  
into → in + to  
together (gather)

(morphological or  
etymological relatives  
in parentheses)

**From McGraw-Hill Reading Wonders  
1st grade “high frequency” words**

**English Spelling is Completely  
Logical and Predictable**

Words make sense in families.  
Study interrelationship of



Source: realspelling.fr

to **UNDERSTAND**  
phoneme-grapheme or “sound-symbol” associations  
AND develop spelling, reading, and vocabulary.

**Questions?**

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[suehegland@me.com](mailto:suehegland@me.com)

## Resources

### **Websites:**

[LearningAboutSpelling.com](http://LearningAboutSpelling.com) - Informational website by Sue

[umw.dyslexiaida.org](http://umw.dyslexiaida.org) - Upper Midwest Branch of IDA website  
(in particular see Recorded Webinars)

[realspelling.fr](http://realspelling.fr) - Orthographic linguistics resources & classes (Spellinars)

[wordworkskingston.com](http://wordworkskingston.com) - Videos and resources for classroom teaching

[linguisteducatorexchange.com](http://linguisteducatorexchange.com) - Blog posts and resources about orthographic linguistics

[etymonline.com](http://etymonline.com) - Amazing etymological reference

### **Teacher blogs:**

Lyn Anderson's Early Years Blog - Beyond the Word <http://wordsinbogor.blogspot.com>

Scot Caldwell's Grade 1 Blog (archived) <https://smallhumansthinkbig.wordpress.com>

Mary Beth Steven's Grade 5 Blog <http://mbsteven.edublogs.org>

a post on starting: <http://mbsteven.edublogs.org/2016/09/11/where-to-begin-when-theres-so-much-to-say/>

Dan Allen's Grade 5 Blog (archived) <http://blogs.zis.ch/dallen/category/languagespellingword-study/>

Ann Whiting's Grade 7 Blog <https://wordinquiry.wordpress.com>

Ann & Lyn's blog: <https://caughtinthespellofwords.wordpress.com/>

### **Book:**

Henry, Marcia, *Unlocking Literacy: Effective Decoding and Spelling*

*Instruction, Second Edition*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2010.

*and see Resources page on LearningAboutSpelling.com for even more...*

# “Getting started” resources:

(We have no financial connection to any of these sources, but if you purchase from them, please tell them you heard about them from Sue and Tim. They are our colleagues and we would love them to know that we appreciate their ongoing work.)

## Pete Bowers’ book with 10 lessons to get started:

At [WordWorksKingston.com](http://www.wordworkskingston.com) - purchase for \$25 plus shipping

[http://www.wordworkskingston.com/WordWorks/WWV\\_Revised\\_Teacher\\_Resource\\_Book\\_%26\\_70\\_Matrices\\_DVD.html](http://www.wordworkskingston.com/WordWorks/WWV_Revised_Teacher_Resource_Book_%26_70_Matrices_DVD.html)

At this link, you can also see a YouTube video of Pete using the first lessons with a class. Pete’s practice has grown and changed since he wrote this book over 10 years ago, but this book is still a great resource for getting started. During his dissertation study, Pete coined the term Structured Word Inquiry (along with his advisor, John Kirby) to describe a process of using scientific investigation to learn about words.

## Free matrices:

Many in photos section of [linguisteducatorexchange](https://www.facebook.com/pg/linguisteducatorexchange) Facebook page

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/linguisteducatorexchange/photos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/linguisteducatorexchange/photos/?ref=page_internal)

Realspellers.org: <http://www.realspellers.org/resources/matrices>

## Matrices to purchase:

Purchase 70 matrices from [realspelling.fr](http://realspelling.fr) for \$34 (price includes shipping)

[http://realspelling.fr/Welcome\\_to\\_Real\\_Spelling/Store.html](http://realspelling.fr/Welcome_to_Real_Spelling/Store.html)

## Use the Mini-Matrix Maker:

The use of this mini-matrix maker is described on the Further Resources page at [LearningAboutSpelling.com](http://LearningAboutSpelling.com)

<https://learningaboutspelling.com/further-resources/>

## Facebook pages:

Structured Word Inquiry and Dyslexia—a public group run by Dyslexia Training Institute

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/227619187712028/>

Structured Word Inquiry in the Classroom—a closed group run by Mary Beth Steven.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/107360163171766/>

Structured Word Inquiry—a private group run by Lisa Barnett. To join you can email Lisa at

[seethebeautyindyslexia@gmail.com](mailto:seethebeautyindyslexia@gmail.com). Send her this message: "Sue Hegland recommends joining the SWI group. Please add me." and put "Add to SWI group" in the subject line. Send from your Facebook email.

Please tell administrators that you heard about the group from us if you need to ask to join, so they’ll know you are not stumbling onto their group with no idea what it is.

## Get updates:

I am writing about these topics periodically. You can subscribe to further updates at [LearningAboutSpelling.com](http://LearningAboutSpelling.com).

Click the Follow button at the lower right corner and enter your email address.

Thanks for your interest in learning more. Understanding how our language actually works is so powerful and makes a difference for so many students. Whatever your role and relationship to dyslexia and learning, thanks for all you do to help others become fully literate.

-Sue Hegland