

# No More Friday Spelling Tests?

## An Alternative Spelling Assessment for Students With Learning Disabilities

Kelly A. Loeffler

"Is it true that you do not give spelling tests?" questioned a perplexed mother at back-to-school night. I was prepared for this question and knew that parents would have difficulty accepting that their children could learn how to spell without the weekly ritual of helping their children study for the traditional spelling test. I quickly explained to her why I changed my assessment to a spelling rubric rather than a traditional spelling test.

A traditional spelling test does not provide insight into the spelling cues that the students are using. (See box, "What Cues Do Writers Use to Spell Words Accurately?") However, a spelling rubric can measure the student's ability to find misspelled words, correct them, and use an appropriate spelling strategy. Students with learning disabilities often do well on weekly spelling tests by memorizing their lists of words, rather than by internalizing spelling strategies. They are quick to forget their weekly words when given a written assignment. Assessing my students' spelling ability was more important to me than evaluating their memorization skills. Heald-Taylor (1998, p. 405) elaborates, "Learning to spell is a complex, intricate cognitive and linguistic process rather than one of rote memorization." (See box, "What Does the Literature Say?")

### Developing an Alternative Spelling Assessment

For the first 2 years of my teaching career, I assigned spelling words on Monday, provided practice throughout the week, gave a pretest, and finally

administered a spelling test on Friday. No undergraduate class taught me to teach spelling this way. I simply imitated the spelling methods from my own elementary school years. In grading spelling tests, I found that students with strong memorization ability were able to score 100% on their tests each week. Students with weaker memory skills became frustrated when they earned a poor grade. However, most of my students did not generalize their weekly spelling words to their writing. Spelling lists and tests became a waste of instructional time for my upper-elementary students. I realized that this traditional method of spelling instruction did not work for my students with learning disabilities. So I decided to try a different method.

An alternative spelling assessment was in the works. I needed a tool that promoted my instructional objectives. I

### What Cues Do Writers Use to Spell Words Accurately?

While writing, good spellers attend to one, two, or a combination of spelling cues to spell words accurately.

- One cue that a writer uses is phonics, or sounding-out the words.
- A writer also uses visual cues.
- A writer can use familiar spelling patterns and ask himself or herself whether the word looks right.
- A writer can use high-frequency words. These are words that the writer knows how to spell simply from exposure to the words through reading.

wanted students to be able to find their misspellings, choose a strategy to fix

### What Does the Literature Say About the Need for Alternative Spelling Assessments?

Students with learning disabilities frequently misspell words. Darch, Kim, Johnson, and James (2000) explained that students with learning disabilities have difficulty spelling because they are less skilled at deducing and using spelling strategies and rules. The researchers concluded that students with learning disabilities do not use their knowledge of sound and symbol correspondences effectively. Students often substitute an incorrect vowel or leave out the vowel altogether. Jones (2001) stated that children with learning disabilities have difficulty detecting their own spelling errors. Teaching students to monitor their misspelled words is crucial to their lifelong growth as writers. A weekly test does not encourage students to monitor their spelling within the context of their writing.

In their study, Gill and Scharer (1996) developed a rubric to provide parents with ratings of their children's spelling performance without administering a spelling test. The researchers found that parents were more appreciative of this information than with obtaining the results of a weekly test.

**Figure 1. Spelling Rubric**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Spelling Rubric**

Title of Writing Assignment: \_\_\_\_\_ Spelling Strategy Used: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Circles all misspelled words</b>	Student found and circled all misspelled words.	Student circled 75%-99% of misspelled words.	Student circled 50%-74% of misspelled words.	Student circled 25%-49% of misspelled words.	Student circled 1%-24% of misspelled words.
<b>Accurately corrects all circled misspelled words</b>	Student accurately corrected all circled misspelled words.	Student accurately corrected 75%-99% of circled misspelled words.	Student accurately corrected 50%-74% of circled misspelled words.	Student accurately corrected 25%-49% of circled misspelled words.	Student accurately corrected 1%-24% of circled misspelled words.
<b>Always uses sounding out, spell-checker, dictionary, or similar words to spell words without help</b>	Student always used one of the taught spelling strategies to spell words correctly on his or her own.	Student almost always used one of the taught spelling strategies to spell words correctly on his or her own.	Student sometimes used one of the taught spelling strategies to spell words correctly on his or her own.	Student always used one of the taught spelling strategies to spell words correctly with some help from an adult.	Student sometimes used one of the taught spelling strategies to spell words correctly with some help from an adult.
<b>Spells all words correctly in writing</b>	Student correctly spelled all the words in his or her writing.	Student correctly spelled 75%-99% of the words in his or her writing.	Student correctly spelled 50%-74% of the words in his or her writing.	Student correctly spelled 25%-49% of the words in his or her writing.	Student correctly spelled 1%-24% of the words in his or her writing.
<b>Grade</b>	/20 points	% =	Letter grade =		

Comments:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

them, and write legibly. From these goals I devised an original rubric (Figure 1) that grades spelling within the context of student writing.

### Implementing a Spelling Rubric

I use the rubric with fifth-grade students in a resource room setting. The children are excited and pleased when I announce that I do not give spelling tests. However, winning over their parents is a little more difficult. During the

first week of school, I send home a copy of the spelling rubric, along with a letter describing the rationale for its use. I encourage parents to contact me with

**Assessing their spelling ability was more important to me than evaluating their memorization skills.**

comments and questions. Parents respond well to the rubric when it is explained clearly to them.

Explaining to the students how the new spelling "test" works is much easier. During the first month of school, I use an overhead to model finding words that "don't look right." I show students how to circle these words but continue their writing. Continuing to write is the most difficult part for the students. Students with learning disabilities usu-

ally recognize that they are not the best spellers. They want to correct their errors as quickly as possible.

To help students detect their errors, I model a spelling self-check routine to the class. The students learn to verify that each syllable has a vowel and that each syllable starts and ends with the appropriate letters. After students circle all their misspelled words, they go back and attempt to correct their spelling. The rubric requires that students use one spelling strategy on their own. The strategies can involve any of the following:

- Asking a friend.
- Sounding out the word slowly by using sound boxes or finger tapping.
- Using a dictionary.
- Using similar words to help them spell the troublesome word.
- Using a spell-checker.

Most students choose to use an electronic spell-checker. MacArthur, Graham, Haynes, and DeLaPaz (1996) found that students with learning disabilities were able to correct 37% of their errors when they used a spell-checker. Without the support of a spell-checker, students could only correct 9% of their errors. Consequently, a spell-

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checker can be an invaluable tool for students with learning disabilities.

To maintain a focus on writing content and creativity, I do not assess students on each composition. I alert them when I will assess their written work for spelling. When students turn in both their rough drafts and their final drafts, I use the rubric to assess their spelling. I compare the rough draft with the final draft to see the improvements that they have made. The rough drafts include their circled misspelled words with their corrections written above the word. The

### Who Benefits From the Spelling Rubric?

- Upper elementary to secondary students.
- Students who have difficulty generalizing their spelling words to their writing.
- Students in general and special education settings

final drafts show their use of spelling strategies. Students are thrilled when their written pieces show few or no spelling errors. When we review their compositions, I hold a one-on-one conference with the students and use their graded rubrics. We discuss the strategies that they used to correct their misspellings. The conference also allows me to introduce new spelling strategies that are based on the errors that the students did not find. The spelling rubric helps me individualize spelling instruction and assessment for my students with learning disabilities (see box, “Steps in Using a Spelling Rubric”).

After seeing my students’ improvement in spelling, general and special educators in my school became interested in the rubric. They, too, were frustrated because their students were not able to generalize their weekly spelling words. (See box, “Who Benefits From a Spelling Rubric?”) Even students not identified as having a learning disability have benefited from using the spelling rubric rather than a spelling test. My principal is also supportive of the alternative assessment. Because her son has a learning disability, she recognizes that not everyone benefits from memorizing lists of spelling words. Her support has encouraged other teachers to undertake the challenge of alternative assessments.

### Benefits of a Spelling Rubric

Using a spelling rubric has many benefits including the following:

- Students receive credit for identifying misspelled words.
- Students use an effective strategy to counteract their disability.
- Teachers identify the spelling strategies that students are using effectively.

- Spelling becomes more meaningful when it is used in context.
- Spelling rubrics allow teachers to evaluate spelling in context and provide grades that replace traditional spelling scores.
- The students’ self-esteem improves.

### Steps in Using a Spelling Rubric

1. Send a letter home to parents describing the rubric. Be sure to attach a copy of the rubric to the letter.
2. Model finding words that “don’t look right.”
3. Model checking for a vowel in each syllable, as well as checking for appropriate beginning and ending sounds.
4. Explain strategies for correcting spelling errors.
5. Hold a conference with students about the graded spelling rubric.

### Spelling Assessment and Instruction

Although the spelling rubric is nontraditional, spelling instruction in my classroom continues to be direct and systematic. I instruct my upper-elementary students by using the Wilson Reading System (Wilson, 1996). Within the system, students learn to tap out words to help them segment the sounds. The spelling rubric is simply another form of assessment, not to be used solely for spelling instruction. Continuing formal spelling instruction in a manner that supports each student’s needs is important.

### Caution

Students with learning disabilities are often very smart and tend to find the quickest way out of a writing assignment. One problem with the spelling rubric was that students would write brief compositions with words they already knew how to spell. To encourage substantial compositions, I arrange the focused correction areas to include at least five words that the students

have never used. I also stipulate how many paragraphs they must write. Students are able to write substantial compositions when I give them a structural framework.

### Final Thoughts

The greatest joy that came from the implementation of this spelling assessment came from Chrissy. As she was writing in her journal about her show dog, she asked me to help her spell a word. I told her to do the best she could and circle the word if it did not look right. Following this single prompt, she continued to write and diligently circled other misspelled words. She then used a spell-checker to correct those words.

This child had never received an A on a spelling test, but that day she received an A from me!

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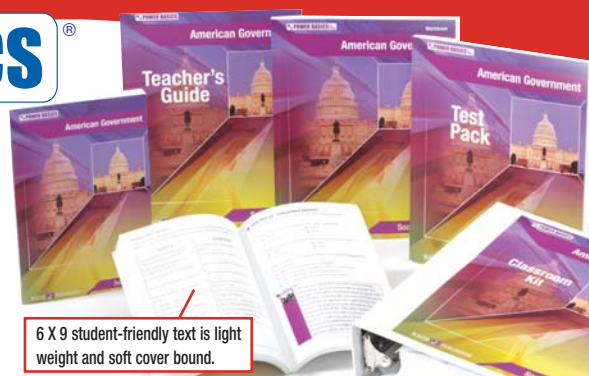
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