

Basic Spelling Rules

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Correct spelling increases credibility and clarity. Although there are always exceptions to the following rules, they serve as general guidelines.

Adding a Suffix

When a **suffix** (an ending) is added to a word, the word's spelling usually changes in the following ways:

One-syllable Words

When a suffix that begins with a vowel (*-ed, -ing, -er, -est*) is added to a one-syllable word that ends in a consonant-vowel-consonant pattern, the final consonant of the word is doubled.

EXAMPLES: plan + ed = **planned**
 swim + ing = **swimming**
 run + er = **runner**
 thin + est = **thinnest**

Multi-syllable Words

When a suffix that begins with a vowel (*-ed, -ing, -er, -est*) is added to a multi-syllable word, the final consonant is doubled if (1) the word ends in a consonant-vowel-consonant pattern, and (2) the accent or stress is on the last syllable.

EXAMPLES: begin + ing = **beginning**
 control + ed = **controlled**

Words Ending in -e

When a suffix that begins with a vowel (*-ing, -ence, -able*) is added to a word ending in *-e*, the word's final *-e* is usually dropped. However, if the suffix begins with a consonant (*-ment, -less, -ly*), the word's final *-e* usually remains.

EXAMPLES: move + ing = moving
 note + able = notable
 advertise + ment = advertisement
 home + less = homeless

Some exceptions to this rule include the words *argument, awful, courageous, judgment, manageable, noticeable, truly, and simply*.

Words Ending in -y

For most words that end in *-y*, if the letter before the *-y* is a consonant, the *-y* becomes an *-i* when the suffix is added. However, if the letter before the *-y* is a vowel, the *-y* remains unchanged.

EXAMPLES: happy + ness = happiness
 portray + ed = portrayed

Some notable exceptions are the words *daily, laid, paid, and said*. Also, anytime *-ing* is added to a word ending in *-y*, the *-y* is not dropped.

EXAMPLES: copy + ing = copying
 delay + ing = delaying

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Choosing Between -s and -es

If a word ends in a consonant, the suffix -s, rather than -es, is usually added. However, -es is used for words ending in -ch, -sh, -ss, -x, or -z.

EXAMPLES: relax + es = relax**es**
 crutch + es = crutch**es**

For words where the final -y is changed to an -i (See “Words Ending in -y” on page 1), -es is used.

EXAMPLES: fry + es =frie**s**
 marry + es = marrie**s**

When a word ends in -o, -es is used rather than -s.

EXAMPLES: do + es = doe**s**
 echo + es = echo**es**
 tomato + es = tomato**es**

Some exceptions to this rule are the words *pianos, radios, sopranos, and solos*.

Choosing Between -ie and -ei

The letter -e precedes the letter -i when the two letters create an “ay” sound, as in *neighbor* and *weigh*. In other cases, however, -i is always placed before -e unless the letter -c precedes them both.

EXAMPLES: vein, nie**ce**
 friend, recei**pt**

Furthermore, even when the letter -c precedes the -i and -e, the word should be spelled with an -ie if the letters combine with the -c to create a “shen” sound.

EXAMPLES: ancie**nt**, conscie**nce**
 efficie**nt**, sufficie**nt**

Hints for Improving Your Spelling

1. Use creative strategies to remember the correct spelling of words. For example, remember that the -a’s in *separate* are separated by an -r, and *dessert* has two -s’s because you want two desserts.
2. Refer to a dictionary, and always check essays with the computer’s spellchecker.
3. Watch out for homonyms (words that have the same sound but different spellings and different meanings). These are often missed by the computer’s spellchecker. Some common homonyms are *their/there/they’re, it’s/its, and hear/here*.
4. Keep a list of words you commonly misspell nearby when you write. Look over returned essays for misspelled words, and add them to your list.
5. Test yourself on spelling using flashcards or other memorization techniques.
6. Put the correctly spelled words that you have problems with somewhere you will see them every day: on a desk, on your mirror, in your car, etc. In time, you will remember the correct spelling instead of the incorrect one.