

Dictation and Spelling, Grade 1

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To spell words correctly, the writer must first hear individual sounds, associate those sounds with specific spellings, and then produce written spelling. These steps constitute a complex series of abilities and skills.

Reading and writing work hand in hand. By learning to recognize the spellings of the different speech sounds of the language, children learn to read. By learning to listen to the sounds of the language and assign the appropriate spellings to those sounds, children learn to spell.

Spellings → Speech Sounds = Reading

Speech Sounds → Spellings = Writing / Spelling

Dictation is the children's introduction to correct spelling. Learning to spell correctly reinforces the sound/spelling connections that the children are learning; thus, it is directly related to success in rapidly decoding words. Dictation is used to help children learn to encode as well as decode words.

For children to learn to develop a spelling strategy, direct instruction is necessary. The translation of spelling to sound is fairly reliable—the letter *n* is a reliable representation of the phoneme /*n*/. The reverse is somewhat reliable; although /*n*/ can be spelled *n*, *kn*_, or *gn*, the spelling *kn*_ can only come at the beginning of a word or syllable.

Research has shown that the experience of seeing an unfamiliar word in print is far superior to hearing the same word spelled (Adams, 1990). Dictation activities are designed to give children the experience of hearing words containing the spellings they are learning in phonics and seeing those patterns in print.

Once children start to learn specific sound/symbol relationships, the teacher introduces dictation. Since encoding, or spelling, is a difficult task, children are introduced to it with considerable support from the teacher. This support is gradually removed as children gain confidence in their ability to hear and represent the sounds of the language. The steps in this progression are as follows:

The Word Building Game

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Sounds-in-Sequence Dictation

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Whole-Word Dictation

In this course, Candice Foster teaches her children to use their knowledge of sounds and spellings to spell words. She provides maximum support at the beginning of each lesson, progressing from sounds-in-sequence to whole-word dictation as children become increasingly comfortable with the task. She makes sure that children have everything ready for dictation: pencils, workbook, and proofreading pens, thus eliminating distractions and saving valuable instructional time. As a result, her children are enthusiastic and engaged throughout the lessons.

Teaching Example 1

In Teaching Example 1, Ms. Foster engages children in the first step in learning to write words that are dictated—the Word Building Game. The Word Building Game gives the children a chance to exercise their segmentation abilities and to practice connecting the sounds and spellings they are learning.

Ms. Foster's classroom management skills, along with her ability to swiftly evaluate her children's progress, make her class feel confident and supported. Every child is completely engaged throughout the Word Building Game.

The Word Building Game

The Word Building Game introduces children to dictation. Early in the Word Building Game, children use the *Letter Cards* for the spellings they have already learned to build words.

Each word in a set differs by only one sound and one spelling. For example:

am	
at	substitute <i>t</i> for <i>m</i>
sat	add <i>s</i> to the beginning of the word <i>at</i>
mat	substitute <i>m</i> for <i>s</i>
mast	add <i>s</i> before the <i>t</i>

The teacher pronounces each word, uses it in a sentence to make sure the children know the word she said, and repeats the word. The children then say the word themselves and use the *Sound/Spelling Cards* to help them identify the correct spellings. Early in the process, physically point to and touch the appropriate cards. The children are required to listen carefully and then make the substitution or addition that they hear from word to word.

Since this activity takes place early in first grade, children are not required to write the letters. Using cards instead of writing the spellings allows the children to focus on the sounds and letters without requiring the additional effort of writing, which sometimes breaks the children's concentration. Although use of the *Letter Cards* is recommended, the Word Building Game can be a pencil-and-paper activity. Later in first grade, as more complex spellings are learned and double letters are required, the Word Building Game will be done as a pencil-and-paper activity.

Teaching Example 2

Teaching Example 2 demonstrates the next step in learning to spell—sounds-in-sequence dictation. By segmenting words into sounds and spelling each sound, children learn to build words sound-by-sound, with complete support and assistance from the teacher. It is important to note that dictation activities are learning experiences—not tests. The children should be given all the support they need.

Sounds-in-Sequence Dictation

Sounds-in-sequence dictation is basically the same activity as the Word Building Game, except that the children write the words. The teacher pronounces a word and uses it in a sentence to make sure the children know the word. Then

the teacher repeats the word and the children say it; together they break the word into its component sounds or segment the sounds and connect those sounds to the spellings. The children write each spelling as it is sounded. As in the Word Building Game, the teacher asks her children to point out each *Sound/Spelling Card* as a sound is identified and the spelling is indicated. For example:

Teacher:	<i>Lap.</i> The kitten sat in my lap. <i>Lap.</i>
Children:	<i>Lap.</i>
Teacher:	What is the first sound you hear in the word <i>lap</i> ?
Children:	[pronounce /l/]
Teacher:	What <i>Sound/Spelling Card</i> represents the sound /l/?
Children:	Lion.
Teacher:	What's the spelling for /l/?
Children:	<i>l.</i>
Teacher:	Write <i>l</i> on the line.
Teacher:	What is the second sound you hear in the word <i>lap</i> ?
Children:	[/a/]

This process continues until the complete word is spelled. The teacher then writes the word on the board (or asks a child to write it), and the children proofread their own work.

In this way, children are given every possible support in their beginning spelling and they are taught to use the *Sound/Spelling Cards* to help them spell. By proofreading, they learn to identify any mistakes and correct them immediately. Because their work always ends in success, children become more confident in their spelling ability.

Teaching Example 3

In this teaching example, Ms. Foster demonstrates whole-word dictation. Now the children hear the word, segment it in their minds, and then write it.

Whole-Word Dictation

As the class becomes more confident in their spelling ability, some of the teacher support is removed. With whole-word dictation, it is the children's responsibility to think through the individual sounds of the words and then to write their spellings.

In whole-word dictation the teacher says the word, uses it in a sentence, says the word again, and asks the children to say it. Initially, the teacher reminds the class to think about each sound they hear in the word, check the *Sound/Spelling Cards*, and then write the spelling.

Children are always encouraged to take responsibility for their work by proofreading and making any necessary corrections.

Teaching Example 4

In Teaching Example 4, Ms. Foster demonstrates sentence dictation. Writing sentences requires children to apply spelling to writing connected text and supports the development of writing fluency.

Sentence Dictation

Sentence dictation helps to bridge the gap between spelling "activities" and spelling simply as part of everyday life. By moving from the dictation of words to the dictation of sentences, the teacher shows her children that these strategies not only are used in the relatively artificial experience of spelling lessons, they also can and should be used in all of their writing.

Children learn to use the spelling strategies to write sentences as well as individual words. The teacher reads the sentence and the children repeat it. Initially, each word is spelled using the sounds-in-sequence routine. They quickly move on, however, to whole-word dictation.

In addition to teaching children to spell words, sentence dictation can be used to teach some conventions of standard English—for example, capitalization and end punctuation.

Teaching Example 5

In Teaching Example 5, Ms. Foster applies the spelling strategies to words that are a bit more challenging because they contain long-vowel spellings. Because the long vowel sounds have multiple spellings, the children need to think not only about the sound but which spelling to use to represent the sound.

Long a Spelled a, a_e

All of the long vowels have multiple spellings. For example, the sound of long *a* can be spelled *a*, *a_e*, *ai_*, or *_ay*. The blanks can help children identify which spelling is used for certain words. The children are introduced to no more than two of the spellings for a long-vowel sound at any given time.

When engaged in a dictation activity, the children should be encouraged to simply ask which spelling to use if they are unsure. Through this activity, the children become familiar with recurring spelling patterns and therefore, need less and less support from the teacher.

As with all dictation activities, proofreading reinforces the child's role as judge of his or her own learning. It is an integral component of all dictation lessons.

Teaching Example 6

Teaching Example 6 continues the sequence in writing long-vowel spellings. Ms. Foster demonstrates with her children the recommended routine to follow when multiple spellings of a long vowel have already been introduced.

Long *i* Spelled *igh*

Ms. Foster and her children demonstrate the ongoing support provided by the *Sound/Spelling Cards*. These cards, on display at all times, are a ready reference for the children to use as they decode new words in their reading and as they learn to spell.

Note at this point in the year that Ms. Foster makes constant reference to the cards and simply tells her class which spelling of a long vowel they should use. As the year progresses, Ms. Foster gradually decreases the support and children are encouraged to ask as needed "which spelling" and to use the cues on the cards, such as the blanks to decide which spelling to use.

Conclusion

Dictation and spelling activities enable children to reflect on the sounds in words and connect those sounds to the appropriate spellings. As a result, children develop writing fluency.

Writing activities such as dictation reinforce the children's knowledge of the sound/spelling relationships and common letter sequences. Dictation practice helps children develop a spelling strategy and integrate reading and writing. It is an opportunity to introduce proofreading—a valuable skill that children can use whenever they write. This also enhances reading proficiency (Adams and Bruck, 1995; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998).

During dictation, the class applies sound/spelling relationships by writing words as the teacher says them. The emphasis on these dictation activities is learning—not testing. Children are encouraged to ask for help and use the *Sound/Spelling Cards* as often as needed. Because dictation is used as a teaching device rather than an assessment tool, children learn the importance of listening carefully without the pressures associated with "testing." Dictation and spelling also provide the teacher with an ideal opportunity to monitor the children's understanding of segmentation, their knowledge of sound/spelling connections, and their ability to proofread and evaluate their own work, all critical steps for developing writing fluency and independence. Daily dictation sessions enable children to make the connection between decoding (reading) and encoding (writing), so that they can see and understand the cumulative effects of everything they learn.