

Chapter 1

Thinking Like a Spelling Teacher

In This Chapter

- ▶ Introducing the cornerstones of good teaching
 - ▶ Getting ready, getting set
 - ▶ Making an early start
 - ▶ Busting through the jargon
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Great teachers take care of all kinds of kids. They climb aloft to reach the highly strung, fix their acts for the divas, and tread warily around kids who rule their parents with iron fists. They seem to have every kind of book and brainstorm at their fingertips and manage to serve it all up with a generous dollop of Zen. What's their thing? Can anyone else get some of it? Can others do effective work without piercing their tongues and going back to college to learn it? Of course! This book piles you up with easy, practical strategies and awfully shrewd insights. Although you may not get the whole Zen thing, and, of course, you miss out on tongue piercing, you nevertheless get a down-to-earth spelling plan. And to add to all that, you get quick yet constructive stuff to do while chugging the kids off to soccer or coercing a cart of chicken noodles and ice cream (you made the mistake of shopping with the kids) through that traitorous slowest-of-all checkout line.

For now, though, don't worry too much about the details, because this is your introductory overview.

In this chapter, I start you gently on your spelling journey by taking a look at learning principles, which are otherwise known as all that stuff that great teachers have on their minds before they even get your child to take his coat off.

Understanding How Learning Works

Great teachers are nice people. They know that your child learns best when he's happy and actively engaged, so they find cool kid things for him to do. They're flexible. They try to think from your child's perspective and inject

fun into every activity. And they see your child and everyone else's pretty much as family — quirky, often difficult, and excitable for sure, but family nevertheless. So, you're asking, what, specifically, do great teachers advise? Read on.

Showing and practicing

You can't just pile information onto your child and expect it to stick. Instead, you need to help him become active and involved in learning — as soon as possible. To help you do that, here's a three-step guide for getting your child actively engaged:

1. Show your child what to do.
2. Give your child plenty of assistance as you practice whatever it is you're doing.
3. Watch and applaud whenever your child independently engages in a learning activity.

Sharing

Sharing also is an important part of learning. Your child thrives on your company, attention, and (deserved) praise. Whenever you can, join in your child's learning. When he's figuring out spellings (that is the entire idea, right?), hang with him and give him your support. A number of good ways to do your part in supporting your child include

- ✓ Showing that spelling in chunks (as in *ac-count*) makes more sense than spelling in single letters. I talk more about spelling in chunks in Part V.
- ✓ Showing that some sounds are spelled with single letters (like *t*) but others are spelled with two or more letters (like *ch*, *ou*, and *eigh*).
- ✓ Letting your child know that most words are spelled in logical chunks of sound (that match, or sort of match, the spelling chunks), but that odd words, like *who*, aren't worth sounding out. In those cases, your child just needs to get to know how they look.
- ✓ Writing common word families on a poster for your child to refer to (like the *ight* family: *light*, *sight*, and *might*) and telling your child about any new families whenever he comes across them. I deal with word families in Chapters 10 and 11.
- ✓ Taking time to check that your child writes all the sight words easily. If a few of them happen to get away, have him jot them down and focus on them for a few days. You can find all the ins and outs of sight words in Chapter 12.

- ✓ Explaining how some sounds are spelled in more than one way (like *bait* and *bay*; *sent* and *cent*).
- ✓ Explaining that vowels always represent a few sounds (like in *mat* and *mate*).
- ✓ Walking your child through common spelling chunks (like *ou* and *oi*).
- ✓ Explaining that developing a good eye for correct spellings is as much a part of being a good speller as knowing all the rules. (Which word looks right, *they* or *thay*?)
- ✓ Showing your child that sometimes a letter is written when there's no sound at all (like in *gnat* and silent *e* on the end of words like *cute*). In Chapter 13, I delve into silent letters, and you can find out about the silent-*e*-on-the-end rule in Chapter 7.
- ✓ Making sure that you tell your child that proofreading is really important.

Knowing when to back off

Have you ever had someone show you a photo album by holding onto it possessively while pointing out each shot? You know, someone who's so interested in the photos that she doesn't realize how irritating it is for you. Hanging onto stuff while showing it also switches off your child's interest. Just like you, your child wants to be the one doing the holding and showing. She wants to get that cool feeling of being in control. Whenever you can, let your child hold the book, the pens, or the worksheet. Having ownership and control means she can learn much more than if she thinks she's learning only *your* stuff. Make your child a willing and engaged learner by backing off and giving her a lead role. Your role needs to be that of facilitator, supporter, and guide — not hog-everything, bossy-britches.

Solving problems

You can help your child figure out spellings in different ways. If he's stuck on the word "library," for example, you can tell him, "Library's spelled *l-i-b-r-a-r-y*," or you can say something like, "Library can be tricky, because it's spelled *li-bra-ry*. Jot all of that down, and see what you get." The first option works, but the second works better. It makes your child do the things that good spellers do. A good speller:

- ✓ Says the word to herself
- ✓ Breaks the word into chunks
- ✓ Jots down the chunks
- ✓ Looks to see whether the finished word looks right

When your terrific speller has done all of that, something occurs to her. She mentally notes that, yes, she *can* figure out spellings by going through logical steps. Even if her very last step is to ask you to correct her word, that's still fine. She's gone through the whole process by herself up to that point, so she's actively learning. In the process, she's remembering the spelling a zillion times better than when her very first step was to give no thought to the word other than to try to weasel the spelling out of you.



Have your child figure out as much of the word as possible before asking you for help finishing it off, but bear in mind that some words really try a child's patience. Take the word *patience*. If you insist that your child figure it out alone, you may just be driving him into a frenzy. Cut him some slack. Adopt a general policy of having your child take a try before demanding satisfaction, but give her help with words whose parts he isn't yet familiar with.

Having a reason to spell well

Your child likes to have a genuine reason to spell. Ask your child to write lists and notes as often as you can so he sees that spelling isn't just a classroom thing but rather is a necessity, or at least an asset, in the real world. If your child isn't convinced, you may want to run these reasons why kids need to learn to spell well past him:

- ✓ Teachers and classmates expect good spellers to be pretty clever all-round.
- ✓ Good spellers are more likely to be called upon by teachers to do responsible jobs that require some writing (like making posters to advertise school performances).
- ✓ Good spellers get better grades for written work.
- ✓ Computer spell-checkers don't catch all spelling errors.
- ✓ Job applications with spelling errors get rejected.
- ✓ People judge you by your spelling (and that includes friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, and people in workplaces).

Having your child say and then spell words

You're going to hear a lot about the importance of having your child say words in chunks and then jot down those chunks. Even when this habit sounds downright obvious to you, your child may not do it instinctively and instead may need you to make things clear. After you do, your child will be off and running. To quickly take your child through the saying-in-chunks part of spelling, lead her through the "What's in a word?" activity.

And the winner is . . .

This kind of conversation usually strikes a chord with parents:

You: It's not a competition.

Your child: I know, but if it was, I'd win.

You: Yes, but it isn't.

Your child: But I'd win.

You: It is *not* a competition!

Your child: I'd still win.

Your child likes to win. Build some healthy competition into spelling activities whenever you can. Lose competitions to your child if you want to (after all, you *are* the adult), but be convincing. Your child won't like being patronized.



Activity: What's in a word?

Preparation: Open your copy of *Teaching Kids to Spell For Dummies* to the list of words in this activity.

Follow these steps:

1. Read these words out loud to your child.
2. Ask your child to tell you what chunks of sound she hears in them. Demonstrate by saying, "Inside is made of *in-side*."



I talk about breaking words into chunks in Chapter 15. I tell you the rules for breaking words into chunks but let you know that it really doesn't matter where your child breaks words as long as she says all the bits. In this activity, don't worry about where those breaks go (your child may say *di-no-saur* or *din-o-saur*); just listen to make sure your child gets the basics of chunking.

1. football
2. pencil
3. puppy
4. distance
5. window

6. player
7. garden
8. friendship
9. neighbor
10. table
11. dinosaur
12. introduce
13. demonstrate
14. partner
15. sister
16. recorder
17. satellite
18. festival
19. parachute
20. prison

Keeping things short and sweet

Sometimes you see a fixed look in your child's eyes and know that he isn't listening to a word you're saying. You're telling him stuff that you already said a thousand times before ("Put your shoes in the closet"), but you're using 60 words rather than 6 ("Shoes get in the way and people trip over them. They bring dirt in and . . ."). That, or he has far more interesting things on his mind. To save yourself disappointment, get real. Your child has a short attention span and is easily distracted. It isn't his fault when he gets that fixed stare, and in any case, he's the kid, and you're the grown-up. Keeping things short and sweet is up to you.

Lightening up

When you teach your child how to spell you have to be organized and authoritative, but other factors are just as important. When kids are asked what they want in a new teacher, they say that they want the teacher to:

- ✓ Like them
- ✓ Care about them
- ✓ Be nice to them

- ✔ Smile at them
- ✔ Be happy
- ✔ Not yell
- ✔ Look nice
- ✔ Understand what a kid's life is like

So maintain a warm and happy tone. That way you keep your child equally as sweet-tempered.



A kitchen timer can come in handy for taking breaks. Have your child set the timer for a 10-minute break so she knows what's happening and when and that she has plenty of control.

Making a big deal about motivation

When the word “motivation” crops up, most people think of tangible rewards. Tangible rewards (like toys, candy, and extra TV) do, of course, motivate, but rewards that involve your child's feelings and perceptions are even better. If your child wants to please you or feel proud, she's naturally motivated, and

Mood lifters

To ward off that heinous “How much longer?” question, try these temper-sweetening tactics:

- ✔ **Change scenery.** Move onto the floor, into another room, or onto the porch.
- ✔ **Have a snack.** Give your child's spirits and blood sugar a lift with high-protein snacks like peanut butter on toast.
- ✔ **Take a break.** Your child's best attention span is pretty short, and yours probably isn't as long as you'd think.
- ✔ **Get moving.** A few shots at the hoop or a walk around the block can get all those feel-good chemicals whizzing around in your brains.
- ✔ **Put on your child's favorite CD.** Soft or familiar music is soothing and helps your child focus better.
- ✔ **Give your child a hug.** Touch is a natural calmer.
- ✔ **Offer your child incentives.** Avoid giving food and TV time if you can. Opt instead for games together, outings to the playground, and extra bedtime reading.
- ✔ **Have timeout for you.** If you get tense and frazzled, your child will, too, so don't let things go that far.
- ✔ **Give your child choices.** Let your child decide when he does his activities and takes breaks. (“You have a violin lesson at 4:30, do you want to do your 30 minutes of spelling before then or after dinner?”)

you don't have to buy new toys and videos in the process. Natural (or internal) motivation is inexpensive, wholesome, and enduring. In practical terms, your child gets a natural boost when you're with her when she does her spelling. The same is true when you offer helpful suggestions (without steam-rolling her) and when you comment on her perseverance, neatness, and cleverness. Praising her correct spellings and sympathizing with her when she struggles, having her take breaks and change activities frequently, and singing her praises to friends and family also are as beneficial as hanging with her after spelling sessions to shoot basketballs, throw a baseball, or simply chat.



The kinds of comments that count as downers or mood busters include ones like these:

- ✔ "I told you already to get your book!"
- ✔ "We looked at that word yesterday; you must know it!"
- ✔ "You're not trying."
- ✔ "Think!"
- ✔ "Look at the word!"
- ✔ "Concentrate!"

Charts — The vital measurements

I know, I know, I just wrote, "I won't bore you with the details," but a thought just occurred to me. What if you actually haven't heard much about making charts? Well, this sidebar is for readers who want or don't mind checking out a few pointers:

- ✔ Phrase your points in positive (rather than negative) terms. Instead of using phrases like, "Don't yell at your sister (or one day I swear I'll crack!)," make points like, "Talk in a polite way."
- ✔ Limit points to only three or four; otherwise, your child (an you for that matter) may find remembering everything she's supposed to be doing a hard thing to do.
- ✔ Get maximum input from your child. Discuss why you need a chart, what she'll gain from it, and what information needs to be listed. Have her make final decisions (after you artfully elicit what you want, of course). Have her write the chart, decorate it, and post it where she wants it to be (again after you've steered things in the right direction).
- ✔ Figure out a manageable rewards system. Start with things like play dates or sleepovers for 20 points rather than a holiday for two in Barbados.
- ✔ Never, ever take points away.

Points and profanity

My youngest child recently discovered the joys of expressing herself with profanities. It flummoxed me. If I ignored her, I ran the risk of the neighbors hearing. If I responded, well then she's gotten the attention she's after. It was a delicate situation, so I responded with a walloping heavy hand. I presented my daughter with a three-checks-and-you're-out system. An expletive earned her a check, and three checks meant no Girl Scout camp. The system was airtight. She soon got three checks and sobbed. . .and sobbed. I had a new dilemma on my hands. Was she truly remorseful? Does remorse excuse past indiscretions? How come I'd been fool enough to deprive myself of possibly the only peaceful weekend that I'll get this year? Well anyway, I don't want to use you readers as my personal psychotherapists, so

I'll cut to the chase. Out of this whole sorry business came a new chart. My daughter asked if she could write a positives chart (like we used to use in the days when I still had a heart). She scurried off with markers and poster paper and surfaced with a new system. She explained it to me, asked if she could start her good behavior immediately (like I'd say, "Uh no, maybe you should stick with the bad behavior for a few days") and went off to sweep and dust my basement, organize the new bookshelf, bring firewood in, and clean the windows. When my house looked like someone else's, I fetched her chart. Putting past differences behind me (pretty graciously I thought), I awarded her four whole points. (Oh, and at the time of this writing, camp's still on.)

Charts

Small kids like points charts (one point for nice manners, one point for a tidy room, and so on). If you get your child to make his own chart, he'll probably like it even better. I won't bore you with the details of allocating points for good behavior and limiting yourself to only three or four sought-after behaviors, because you've probably already heard that to death, but remember to include charts in your mental list of cool writing tasks.

Gathering Your Tools

A friend of mine once told me that his personal, all-to-himself space steadily diminished from the time his kids were born. Before kids, he said, his whole house was his personal space, give or take a few square feet for his wife. When his kids were toddlers his personal space was a room. When his kids were mobile, but still small, his space became a desk. At the time of our conversation, with school-age kids, he maintained that his personal space was

one drawer that he, luckily, still had the key to. I know just what that friend feels like. My kids frequently lose their own scissors, tape, and erasers and have no compulsion about pilfering my desk. “But I have to hand this report in tomorrow,” or “I’ll put it back,” they say. Yeah, right! Gather (and hide) your personal items, and organize and stow safely away the pens and paper that you need. Achieve this state of grace through iron resolve and a keep-your-thieving-hands-off policy (or by squirreling these items away under sofas and piles of socks just before spelling time).

Kits

Scour your toyshop, and you’re sure to find some kind of word-building kit. Often it’s a nifty case in which letter tiles and activity cards all fit snugly. Kids love kits and do miles of spelling with them. They like fitting tiles into their right places, getting the better of whole stacks of work cards, and carrying the case around. Add a kit to your games stash, and you’ll be glad you did. Don’t forget to admire the case and its owner; otherwise, with no one to notice it, the ensemble (and its benefits) won’t be half as attractive to your child.



For educational games you can view and buy on the Internet, check out www.EducationalLearningGames.com. A particularly good spelling kit for beginning spellers is *Spell Time* by Cadaco, which has the Parenting Center seal of approval, and a favorite spelling game for the entire family is *Quiddler*. To view both games and many more, click on the “Spelling” option in the menu.



If you’re in an Internet-surfing mood, check out home-schooling Web sites for good spelling resources and games. The reviewers do their reviewing conscientiously and with fervor.

Flashcards

Flashcards sometimes get a bad rap. People grab handfuls of cards from boxes they buy at the store, wave them at their child and wonder why she goes off to watch TV instead of getting caught up in the excitement. Flashcards aren’t a substitute for absent adults, but they’re great learning tools when you use them with your child in a systematic and interactive way. The trick is to take part but not take on too much in one go. If you’re showing your child how to spell *ain* words, a bunch of *ain* flashcards are all that you need. Two hundred mixed spellings, all flashed at your child in one sitting, won’t help him much. That said, here are some terrific, inexpensive sets of flashcards. They come in sturdy boxes that you can take with you everywhere, and you can pick them up at any good school supplies store.

- ✓ *Easy Vowels* by Frank Schaffer
- ✓ *Easy Blends and Digraphs* by Frank Schaffer
- ✓ *Beginning to Read Phonics: Fishing for Silent “e” Words* by Judy/Instructo
- ✓ *Beginning to Read Phonics: Word Family Fun, Long Vowels* by Judy/Instructo
- ✓ *Easy Sight Words* by Frank Schaffer

Dictionaries

Chances are that, unlike one friend of mine, you don’t read a dictionary for relaxation. But do you own one? Do you keep it in a place that’s accessible to your child? Does your child see you head to it when you’re halfway through

Hands-on with flashcards

Not sure what to do with the flashcards you bought? First, select from your cards only the ones that you want your child to focus on for now. Then:

- ✓ Have your child look at one word at a time, cover it, and either spell it out verbally to you or write it down. (The verbal response is good for in the car.)
- ✓ Have your child spread the words face down on the floor, pick out one word at a time, peek at it, and then spell it verbally to you.
- ✓ Have your child write or verbally spell the words that you read out loud.
- ✓ Have your child look at ten words for one minute then spell them (in writing or verbally) as you call each one out.
- ✓ Have your child look at ten words and then spell them back to you as you read them out in clue form. (“This word starts with *st*.”)
- ✓ Have your child spread ten words face up on the floor and study them for one minute. Take a word away, have him guess which word’s missing, and then have him spell it out. To make this task more challenging, mix up the cards after he’s had his first look.
- ✓ Have your child look at ten words from a word family (all, call, ball, and so on) and then spell out as many of the words as he can remember.
- ✓ Give your child rhyming clues for spellings. (“This word rhymes with pear.”)
- ✓ Get your child to spell homonyms (“What’s the other way to spell *s-o-n*?”). For this you can use *Homonyms Match* flashcards by Judy/Instructo.
- ✓ Have your child spell words from picture clues. A good set of cards for this is *Easy Action Picture Words* by Frank Schaffer.

Let's hear it for the boys

By now you've all heard that boys lag behind girls in picking up books and jotting down stories. Boys consistently score lower in reading tests than girls, and when they're asked about books and libraries, they say that they're really not all that interested. The good news is that much more is now known about making reading better for boys. Many of the things that we know about boys and reading also apply to boys and spelling, including that boys like:

- ✓ Information in short blasts
- ✓ Nonfiction
- ✓ Searching for information to solve real problems
- ✓ Comics, magazines, sports pages, and computer games

Ah ha. Computer games. You can make the most of that. A study of boys' spelling in the United Kingdom found that computers actually help boys with their spelling. When groups of boys spelled words and then fixed them either with pen and paper and a dictionary or a computer spell-checker, the spell-checker kids made spectacular gains. How so? Researchers believe that using the spell-checker doesn't imprint spellings on boys' minds, but rather it engages kids in active inquiry. The spell-checker kids had to put their words into the checker and then consider whether the answers they got applied. Whenever the answers didn't apply, they had to resort to paper and pen. All the problem solving and figuring out fired up the boys' interests so that their answers were best. The message for parents: Don't fight your son's computer worship, tap into it.



some smart newspaper article and hit a word like *ontologism*. You do? He does? That's great. Regular, routine habits like these influence your child the most.

For an online dictionary, check out www.dictionary.com.

The computer spell-checker

When my husband first plunked a computer down in our spare room, I was skeptical. Did we *really* need to fancy up our lives quite so dramatically. That was a long time ago, and now I'm practically tethered to my computer. And I get more and more dependent on the spell-checker. Your child will too (if it hasn't happened already), so now you see where all that proofreading that I talked about earlier comes into its own. Is your child's proofreading keeping pace with his lightning-fast reflex for clicking on the spell-checker?

Watching for Readiness

When it comes to spelling, what's normal comes in a wide range. Your child develops prespelling skills, such as hearing the parts inside of words and

drawing circles and lines, at around age 2. Later, when your child starts kindergarten or school, she brings home never-ending strings of writing with no spaces between words. In the next few paragraphs, I take a look at the pieces that come together to set your child securely on the path to spelling well.

Getting an early start

Plenty of the things that you do with your preschooler set the stage for your child gaining spelling prowess. You probably don't even realize that you're already doing a great job of preparing your child to spell. In fact, take a look at this list and for every activity that you get your child to do, give yourself a pat on the back.

- ✔ **Bats, balls, and bicycles:** Toys like these, which make your child move, help develop gross motor coordination. You may not think these skills have much bearing on your child's future spelling, but studies show that when kids go through a course of motor skill development, their academic performance also improves. Some learning centers make the most of this benefit by having kids bounce on trampolines or jump rope for a while before settling down to write.

35 percent satisfaction guaranteed

You can find this poem on a zillion Web sites. It shows just how wrong your child's writing can be even after she's run it through a spell-checker. If she hasn't already come upon the poem in school, find out whether she can correct the mistakes now. Moral: Don't dispense with the noble practice of proofreading just yet.

Eye halve a spelling checker

It came with my pea sea

It plainly marcs four my revue

Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

Eye strike a key and type a word

And weight four it two say

Weather eye am wrong oar write

It shows me strait a weigh.

As soon as a mist ache is maid

It nose bee fore two long

And eye can put the error rite

It's rare lea ever wrong.

Eye have run this poem threw it

And I am shore your pleased two no

Its letter perfect awl the weigh

My checker tolled me sew.

— Sauce unknown

- ✔ **Modeling compound (Play Doh), beads and thread, LEGOs, puzzles, and blocks:** When you provide all this nice stuff for your child to play with, you're not just giving him fun things to do, you're also helping his fine-motor coordination. Be especially conscious of your son's fine-motor coordination because it lags a little behind his sister's.
- ✔ **Pens, pencils, markers, crayons, paper, whiteboards, blackboards, and paint:** These media encourage creativity, something that your child can never have too much of.
- ✔ **Rhymes, songs and poems:** Nice-sounding rhymes, songs, and poems get your child listening to sound chunks. Later, your child starts to spell by repeating those sound chunks either out loud or to herself.
- ✔ **Listening and word games (like "I Spy" and "Going to Aunt Maud's," described in Chapter 21):** Again, the hearing part of spelling is important, and these kind of games home in on that.
- ✔ **Educational TV and CDs:** Fun, clever and easy avenues for your child to discover spelling techniques.
- ✔ **Books, comics, magazines and posters:** With short blasts of text that need to be watched especially closely, these works help your child develop an ever-so-helpful good eye for spelling. An extra bonus that accompanies comics and magazines is that they usually include word games.
- ✔ **Cards, letters, and notes:** Again, reading and writing these items makes your child looking closely at spellings, and that's always good.



Kids love to have their own space stocked with pencils, paper, glue, scissors, and markers. Regardless of whether it's a cardboard box or a real desk, a messy or tidy zone, or whether it's situated in the kitchen or in your child's own room, it can be a creative haven.

Paying attention to posture and pencil grip

Are you amazed by how your 9-year-old still starts a meal with his chair at a 45-degree angle about a foot away from the table? I am. It isn't just meals that can send your child into a daze; the same thing can happen when he writes. When your child gets ready to put his pen to paper, make sure that his chair is pulled comfortably to the table and he looks relaxed but not on the verge of snoozing. Teachers typically tell beginning writers these kinds of things:

- ✔ Hold your pencil between your thumb and pointer finger and then let it rest on the third finger.
- ✔ Hold the pencil on the paint, not on the exposed wood near the point.

Finger Olympics

If you think that your child's fine-motor skills can use a workout (so your child holds and guides a pencil better), try some of these finger Olympics. Have your child:

- ✔ Turn a pencil over again and again, eraser end up then lead end up, using only one hand.
- ✔ Pick up small objects, like LEGO blocks, using only one hand and keeping them in that hand until it's full. Then have your child put the blocks back down, one at a time, and still one-handed.
- ✔ Pick up small items, like dried beans or pasta shells, with tweezers. For an easy start use cotton balls.
- ✔ Draw around stencils and templates.
- ✔ Put some tape on the bottom line of the page to help remember not to write on it.
- ✔ Use a finger or Popsicle stick to help remember to leave spaces between words.
- ✔ Trace many shapes and objects. Make laminated sheets by covering regular sheets of letters and words with transparent adhesive book covering (which you can buy at stationary stores). Pick up some erasable whiteboard markers and a cloth to complete the kit.
- ✔ Draw between lines (draw parallel lines like roads).
- ✔ Use dot-to-dot activity sheets.
- ✔ Warm up her hands before writing by shaking them, clapping them together, and then stretching her arms up and overturning her hands, and by rubbing her palms together.



A few of the things you can do to help your child keep this hold are

- Put a rubber band on the pencil above the exposed wood near the point so your child's fingers touch it and she remembers where to hold on.
- Put a pencil grip on the pencil.
- Push the pencil through a practice golf ball (the kind with lots of holes).
- Put clay around the pencil.
- Have your child use long (not short) pencils (throw out the short pencils).
- ✔ Have your bottom (yes your rear end, caboose, or tushie) to the back of your chair.
- ✔ Put your feet flat on the floor.

Oh, my aching back

Does your child carry absurd amounts of who knows what in his school backpack? If he does, he can develop a lopsided posture or back and shoulder pain, and that can make sitting down and writing for long periods uncomfortable for him. Here are a few things that your child can do to keep his back and shoulders in good shape:

- ✔ Get a backpack with wide, padded, adjustable shoulder straps.
- ✔ Wear the straps tightened.
- ✔ Always carry the pack over both shoulders.
- ✔ Regularly sort through the contents, and *take out the extraneous stuff*.

- ✔ Place your forearms on the writing surface.
- ✔ Slant your paper (to the left for right-handers, to the right for left-handers). Tape the paper to the desk, if that helps.
- ✔ Use your helper (or opposite) hand to hold the paper down near to the top of the sheet.
- ✔ Take 2-minute stretch breaks from writing every 20 to 30 minutes.

Keeping an eye on your child's vision

If you're worried about your child's eyesight, have your child's vision tested, and don't hesitate to get second and third opinions. You can keep a watchful eye on your child's vision (especially when other family members have vision problems) by being aware of these indicators of possible vision problems:

- ✔ Your child tilts his head.
- ✔ Your child squints.
- ✔ Your child rubs his eyes, especially after looking at books.
- ✔ Your child complains of headaches.
- ✔ Your child feels dizzy pretty often.
- ✔ Your child seems to tire easily after reading.
- ✔ Your child holds books at an unusual angle or distance.

I'm neither a doctor nor an optometrist, so the information that I give you here is just what parents have told me. It's always good, though, to hear advice from people who have overcome problems, so here's what my sources say:

Making accommodations for your lefty

The world is pretty much made for right-handers. So if your child is a southpaw, she may sometimes need some extra help. This list offers a few pointers that can make your lefty's life more comfortable:

- ✔ Give your left-handed child room on her right, um I mean, left (or strong) side. She takes up more than the usual space because of the angle at which she writes. If an insensitive, brutish righty plunks down to your child's left, elbows bump, and the jostling begins.
- ✔ If your lefty develops an awkward writing posture, it's probably to avoid smudging her work or writing hand or so she can see what she's writing — or, more likely, both.
- ✔ Your lefty hates conference-style desks with a right-handed rest. They're nigh on impossible for her to use.
- ✔ Your lefty may find that leaning on pads and books makes writing easier than when she writes on single sheets of paper and that notebooks with the spiral on top make her life much easier. And guess what, you can get specialty notebooks with the spiral binding on the right but notebook holes on the left — how cool is that?
- ✔ Your left-handed child probably isn't too fond of whiteboards. Using erasable markers makes it awfully easy for her writing hand to erase what she's just written. (Tilting the board can help.)
- ✔ Make life easier for your lefty by getting her left-handed writing tools. Ever seen a left-handed ruler? It has a zero on the right and numbers running toward the left. Pens with fast-drying ink (you have to experiment) also are a good idea.
- ✔ Your lefty actually has an easy time with keyboarding, because, just like you, she does 50 percent of the typing with her left hand. The number keypad on the right can cause her problems, though, but you can buy a special keyboard.
- ✔ The biggest problem your lefty may have with computers is using a right-handed mouse. You can either move the mouse to her left (if no right-handers use the PC or it's set up for all household members to switch back and forth) or buy her a left-handed mouse. Your child may instead prefer to simply get used to using the mouse right-handed. Doing so is easier than making changes and has benefits. With the rise in popularity of video games, being able to use your weak hand is a distinct advantage.

✔ If your son seems to lag a little behind where your daughter was with reading and writing at the same age, don't jump to the conclusion that his vision is impaired. Statistically, boys develop language skills later than girls.

✔ Roughly gauge whether your child sees letters and symbols clearly by having him play with activity books that include activities like spotting the differences between shapes and letters and matching identical shapes and letters.



You can easily do your own regular minitests of your child's vision. When you're waiting for food at your favorite takeout restaurant, ask your child to read off a few items. If she's slow or unable to respond, take a trip to the optometrist.

Listening for hints about your child's hearing

Spotting whether your child has a hearing problem can be tricky, because all kids shout and ignore their parents when it seems like a good idea to them. But parents whose kids have hearing problems say to watch for these indicators:

- ✓ Your child has many ear infections.
- ✓ Your child shouts and talks excessively loud just about all the time.
- ✓ Your child doesn't answer you, even when you're saying good things.
- ✓ Your child quite often doesn't hear words the right way.



Statistically, boys are more prone to ear infections than girls.

Moving in the direction of reading and writing

One of the best things that you can show your child when he starts jotting down spellings is where to lead his pen. He needs to move from top to bottom with individual letters and from left to right with his words and sentences. Letter shapes go in all directions, but the starting point for printing always is somewhere at the top. Up-to-down and left-to-right printing doesn't directly give your child great spelling skills, but indirectly it makes all the difference. If your child writes in a smooth flow, he has brainpower to spare to figure out spellings. If he uses half of his brainpower trying to speed up and improve his writing, it's an unnecessary waste of good grey matter.



For downloadable writing sheets with options for tracing and dot-to-dot exercises, visit www.handwritingworksheets.com.

Jargon Busting

In this book, you come across a smattering of jargon. Most of it is stuff you've already heard, like *phonics* and *dictation*, but a bit of it, like *phonemic awareness* and *digraph*, is quite, well, classroomy. This section gives you a rundown

of familiar and new jargon so that you won't run into any surprises farther down the track. If the new words seem a bit scary right now, fear not. When I use them in this book, I give real-life examples to show exactly what I'm jabbering about.

Brushing up on familiar terms

Relax. Table 1-1 is full of terms that you'll probably feel completely comfortable with. It's Table 1-2 that you want to watch out for!

Table 1-1	Familiar Terminology
<i>Term</i>	<i>What It Means</i>
apostrophe	This punctuation mark looks like a comma, but sits up high rather than down on the line. It's used to show possession like in "Sally's book." Your child can put it in contractions like "It's Tuesday," but she mustn't put it in phrases like "Yesterday was its birthday," because this kind of "its" is what technically is called a possessive personal pronoun and it doesn't require an apostrophe.
blends	<i>St</i> and <i>str</i> are blends. When two or three letters blend one into the next but each keep their own sound, that's a blend.
comprehension	A fancy word for understanding.
consonants	Letters that aren't vowels. The five vowels are <i>a</i> , <i>e</i> , <i>i</i> , <i>o</i> , and <i>u</i> . The rest of the letters in the alphabet are consonants. <i>Y</i> sometimes functions as a vowel.
contractions	Words (like <i>can't</i> and <i>I'm</i>) that are made by shortening other words (<i>cannot</i> and <i>I am</i>).
dictation	When you say or read text aloud for your child to write.
fine-motor skills	Small physical movements like writing and threading.
gross-motor skills	Big physical movements like kicking and jumping.
homonyms	Words (like <i>sun</i> and <i>son</i>) that sound the same.
learning styles	How each child learns things in a number of ways. A child has more than one kind of learning style, so teachers must tap into all of them — seeing (visual), hearing (auditory), and doing (kinesthetic).

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)	
Term	What It Means
mnemonic	Memory joggers like “ <i>i</i> before <i>e</i> except after <i>c</i> ” and “there’s a <i>bus</i> in <i>business</i> .”
multisensory learning	Learning that uses as many of your senses as possible. Teachers often use it to describe the way they have kids look, say, and write.
nouns	Names of actual things (like <i>man</i> , <i>pen</i> , and <i>book</i>).
phonics	Showing your child how letters of the alphabet represent sounds.
plurals	More than one. Words like <i>man</i> , <i>pen</i> , and <i>book</i> are singular, while <i>men</i> , <i>pens</i> and <i>books</i> are plurals.
possessive apostrophe	When your child uses an apostrophe to show possession, like in “ <i>Sharon’s dog</i> ” or “ <i>The man’s shoe</i> .”
prefixes	A chunk of letters added to the beginning of a root word (a root word is a word all by itself). Chunks like <i>un</i> , <i>dis</i> , and <i>pre</i> are prefixes. Your child writes them in words like <i>uneven</i> , <i>disappoint</i> , and <i>preconception</i> .
proofreading	Looking over what you’ve written to check that it’s right.
proper nouns	Names of specific, not general, things. Words like <i>man</i> and <i>book</i> are nouns, but <i>Mr. Brown</i> and <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> are proper nouns.
root word	A word that can either stand alone or have prefixes and suffixes added onto it. <i>Appoint</i> is a root word, because it can become <i>disappoint</i> and <i>appointed</i> .
silent letters	Letters that your child writes even though he can’t hear them when he says the word. Silent letters are letters like <i>k</i> in <i>knee</i> and <i>gh</i> in <i>night</i> .
soft letters	<i>C</i> and <i>g</i> have soft sounds in words like <i>city</i> and <i>gem</i> . The soft sound of <i>c</i> is “ <i>ss</i> ”, the soft sound of <i>g</i> is “ <i>j</i> .”
suffixes	A chunk of letters added to the end of a root word (a root word is a word all by itself). <i>Ed</i> and <i>ing</i> are suffixes that your child uses often in words like <i>spelled</i> and <i>spelling</i> .
syllables	Sound/spelling chunks. The word <i>sound</i> has one syllable (you say it in one chunk) whereas <i>spelling</i> has two syllables.

Term	What It Means
vowels	The five letters a, e, i, o and u. <i>Y</i> sometimes functions as a vowel, as in <i>sky</i> .
word building	Spelling words in their respective parts. Your child may start with <i>an</i> and build it into <i>ant</i> , and then <i>pant</i> , and then <i>panted</i> .

Catching up on new terms

Now's the time to brace yourself, take deep breaths, or reach for the candies you've been saving for times of stress and high need. Table 1-2 is where I give you a bunch of terminology that any teacher would be proud of. Pace yourself, drink plenty of fluids, and don't even think about skipping the stretches. Otherwise, you'll pull some embarrassing or unsightly thing and have only yourself to blame.

Table 1-2 Upscaling Your Terminology	
Term	What It Means
contextual cues	Clues that your child gets from the context or gist of the text. Let's say that your child's reading a book and gets stuck on the word " <i>gypsy</i> ." She looks to the rest of the text, the illustrations, and the grammar to help her figure out the word. Those are contextual cues.
digraph	Two letters that together make a new sound that isn't the sound of them blending together. <i>Ch</i> , <i>th</i> , <i>sh</i> , and <i>ph</i> are consonant digraphs.
graphophonics/ phonographics	Looking at the sounds and shapes of letters in words.
phoneme, phonograph, phonogram	Chunks of sound/spelling like <i>st</i> , <i>sm</i> , <i>ee</i> , <i>igh</i> , and <i>ou</i> .
phonemic awareness	The awareness that letters and chunks of letters represent sounds and are used in many different words.

(continued)

Table 1-2 (continued)	
<i>Term</i>	<i>What It Means</i>
schwa vowels	Vowels that make an indistinct “uh” sound. The end <i>a</i> in <i>camera</i> is a schwa vowel.
sight words	Words that are so common that your child needs to read and write them fluently (or risk being a stop-start sort of reader and writer).
visual discrimination (and auditory discrimination)	Being able to see the difference between letters and letter chunks in words. (<i>Auditory discrimination</i> means being able to hear the difference between letters and letter chunks in words.)
word families	Groups of words, like <i>about</i> , <i>shout</i> , and <i>out</i> , that share a spelling and sound pattern.