

powerful change can take place. A key source for that change can be found in area that has been overlooked—largely because it does not play a role in either whole language or phonics. That area is visual sequencing and memory. This is the skill that good spellers steadily rely on for their prowess; it is the skill that enables them to look at a word and know immediately if it is spelled correctly or not. While few children will reach the level of an expert speller, with the right two-step process, it is possible to go a long way towards that goal. When a child has trouble with a word, the first step is to write the word down and show it to him or her. Allow all the time needed for the child to take in the information. What you are doing is providing a correct visual model of the word. This fosters visual analysis and is far more effective in developing correct spelling than is the usual practice of “spelling” a word by saying aloud the letters that make up the word. For the second step, remove the visual model and ask the child to write the word from memory. If it is correct, that is great and you can move on. If it is not correct, you repeat the process. At no point is the child permitted to simply correct the particular letters that might be incorrect, absent or misplaced. The key is to have the child produce the full word correctly at one time, and not to permit piecemeal corrections. This approach can be extended in a number of ways. For example, after the model has been removed, in place of asking the child to reproduce the whole word, you show an incomplete model of the word (e.g., for a word like rescue, the child might see _ e _ c u _). The child then has to fill in the appropriate letters to create the complete word. When this is repeated several times, each time with a different set of missing letters, the child’s grasp of the letter relationships in the word gains considerable strength. As a child’s writing accuracy improves, this approach can then be extended to longer and longer segments so that the child becomes proficient in correctly writing whole sentences and sets of sentences. It is worth noting that, at least for a while, it is useful to put some “tried and true” practices on hold. One such practice is the ubiquitous suggestion to “go to the dictionary and look it up.” Dictionaries are wonderful resources, but for someone whose spelling is weak, a dictionary can be a torture chamber. A child may plod through the requested search when an adult is there to insist upon it; when that same child is alone, however, he or she will not initiate a comparable search. And strategies that a child fails to apply independently, even though the skill is there, are generally ones to be avoided. The suggestions offered here do not meet Jefferson’s challenge to “never spell a word wrong.” But in this age of spell checks, his demand seems excessively stringent. Still and all, his words are useful in focusing us on the pandemic spelling problems that children have been saddled with by current methods of instruction and in stimulating us to develop alternative tools that will grant children success in this vital area.

About the Author

Dr. Marion Blank, Ph.D. is the Director of the A Light on Literacy program at Columbia University. Dr. Blank has spent over 40 years studying how children learn to read. She has lectured extensively around the world, served as a consultant to government bureaus abroad, authored the widely used Preschool Language Assessment Instrument, developed an award-winning computer program that teaches reading, and written over sixty articles and six books on language and literacy. Her alternative method has helped thousands of children learn to read, and her latest book, [The Reading Remedy](#), and her new reading system, Phonics Plus Five, makes the ideas behind her comprehensive program available to every parent. More information is available at www.phonicsplusfive.com.

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