

# Nelson English Usage

*Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum*

## The English spelling system

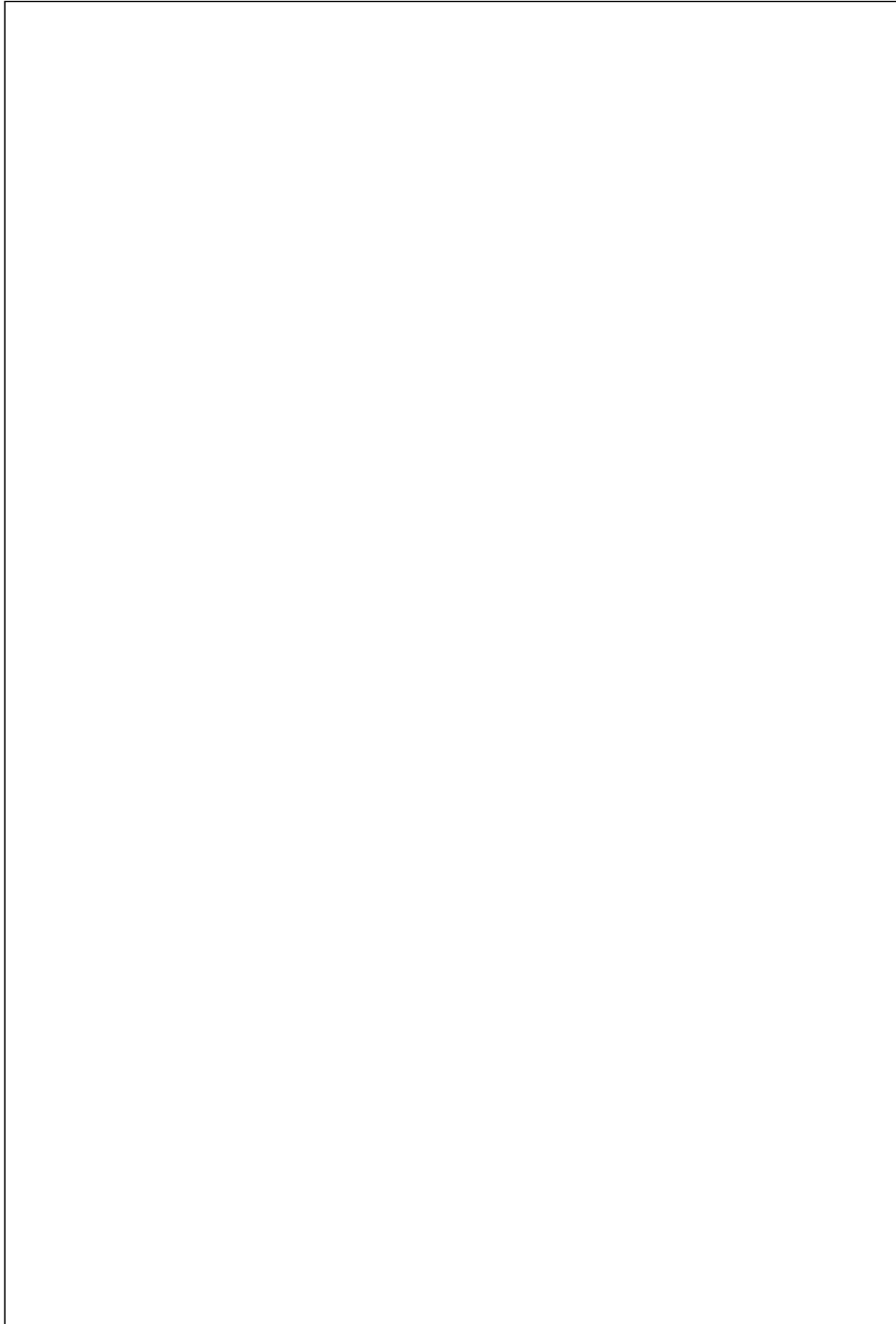
The English spelling often seems contradictory and inconsistent. Certainly there are some rules that can be learnt, but there are many exceptions to the rules and many words that simply have to be learnt as 'sight' words. Learning phonics – how to sound out words – is a help in learning to read and to spell, but it does not work for some of the most common words in English. There is a story about a little girl who was learning to read and making good progress when she was introduced to the word 'once'. She is supposed to have burst into tears: everything that she thought that she had understood was undermined by the fact the word did not follow the rules she had learnt.

It is impossible to say exactly how many English words have irregular spellings. Many words that we have borrowed from other languages (and no other language borrows as often and as freely as does English) continue to be spelt according to the 'foreign' spelling rules: try 'sounding out', for example, *fiancé* or *boutique*, *yacht* or *barbecue*. Many technical words use the spelling systems of Greek or Latin, such as *onomatopoeia* or *rhyme*.

The problem has always been that our alphabet has only 26 letters (originally 23) and they are to be used to represent at least 40 different sounds. Most difficult of all is that there are only five vowel letters – *a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u* – to represent a wide variety of vowel sounds.

### Some questions to research

- 1 What are the most common words in the English language – the ones that we use over and over again in all of our writing and speaking? Make a list and see how many of them have irregular spellings.



2 Survey the names of people in the class - first names and surnames. How many of them can be 'sounded out'?

3 What is the difference between *phonics* and *phonetics*?

4 What is the International Phonetic Alphabet? How is it different from the alphabet used to spell the words of English?

5 Look at the Pronunciation Guides in the prefaces of several large English dictionaries, such as *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* or *The Macquarie Dictionary*. How many symbols do they use to represent the sounds of English?

For centuries spelling was no problem. Writers of English simply spelt words the way they sounded. The way in which English speakers pronounced words over time – or in different regions – changed, but that was no problem either. As pronunciation changed, the way they spelt words changed. No one thought that consistency in spelling was important, and the same word could be spelt several ways. As late as the age of Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare signed his name using different spellings.

Even though the invention of printing was the stimulus for the development of standardised spelling and punctuation systems in English, it was some time before the idea of always spelling a word in the same way became popular. In fact, in Shakespeare's day, printers, who set type by hand, would add a letter or two to a word or omit a letter to make the line of print even. This was called 'justifying', something we do nowadays with Word when we click the box that makes both the left- and right-hand margins of our printed documents straight.

Printing did eventually influence the way words were spelt and the idea of a 'correct' spelling grew.

The problem was that pronunciation continued to change. Once spelling became standardised and fixed, a gap grew between the spelling and the pronunciation. This was especially so with the vowel sounds, where change over time and place is most obvious. Apart from the efforts in the United States in the nineteenth century – when Noah Webster conducted a determined campaign to make English spelling more logical – spelling has not changed much in the last four centuries, although pronunciation has changed quite a lot over that time.

### Some questions to research

- 1 Who was Noah Webster? What changes did he make to American spelling? Were all his recommendations adopted?

- 2 There are some organisations dedicated to reforming English spelling. Investigate the subject of spelling reform and list the reasons why it would be a good idea.

- 3 Spelling reform would make great sense, except that it would mean that, before long, none of us (except scholars) would be able to read anything that had been published a few centuries ago. Worse, we would find it very difficult to read something published in a different part of the English-speaking world; for example, Australians would have some trouble reading what was written by New Zealanders because the vowel sounds we use are so different and those differences seem to be increasing. Do some research to find out why spelling reform would make it impossible – or, at least, very difficult – to read English texts from other times or places.