

Spelling Tips 5 – Ambiguous Vowels

English is such a disorderly language. If only we had adopted a phonetic spelling where each sound had its own formalised representation, where, for example, the sound 'ee' as in *feet* was always written as a double *e*. Instead we have the same sound in *these* (written as a single *e*), *machine* (written as an *i*), and *carry* (written as a *y*).

Even worse is the *ay* sound as in *bay*. Look at the following: *bake, ballet, maid, straight, gauge, great, veil, grey, and weigh*. Going by the sound alone there is no way of telling if you should write *way* or *weigh*.

Sometimes the difficulty arises because the word comes into English from another language which has its own, different sound-to-letter relationships. So, for example, we have *plateau* and *bureau* with the 'oh' sound represented by *eau*, because these words are from French. But words like *muesli* and *bonsai* are so far from English sound/spelling equivalents that we know we have to learn them. It is always going to be words like *brooch* and *broach* that cause us a problem.

Watch out for these tricky words:

aquatic: Remember the *a* spelling for the 'o' sound in the middle. This will be easier to remember if you see that **aquatic** comes from *aqua*, the Latin word for 'water'.

dwarf: Remember the *ar* spelling for the 'aw' sound. Another word with this sound and spelling pattern is *wharf*.

foreign: The ending is spelt *ign* (not *in* or *en*). The *g* is silent.

gangrene: The end is spelt *ene* (not *een*). Remember that **gangrene** has nothing to do with the colour green.

grevillea: Remember that the vowel before the final *a* is *e* (not *i*). This word comes from the name of a Scottish botanist, CF *Greville* (died 1809). The *a* has been added to make it a scientific name.

heifer: Remember that **heifers** 'eat in fields' to help you remember there is an *i* between the *e* and single *f* in this word.

hierarchy: Don't let the meaning and sound of this word trick you into thinking that it contains the word *high*. The letters *hie* spell the 'huy-uh' sounds at the beginning.

hydraulic: The 'o' sound in the middle is spelt *au*. Also remember the *y* spelling in the first syllable. This is part of the prefix *hydr-* (a form of *hydro-* meaning 'water').

jewel: Notice the unusual group of letters *ewe* making the 'ooh' sound.

lenient: There is only a single *e* spelling the 'ee' sound in the first syllable.

leopard: The 'e' sound in the first syllable is spelt *eo*. This is because the word comes from *leo*, the Latin word for 'lion'. Also remember there is an *r* in the last syllable.

manoeuvre: This is a very difficult word to spell because of the group of three vowels *oeu* which give the 'ooh' sound. This is the beginning of the word part *oeuvre* which is the French word for 'work'. *Manoeuvre* has come into English from French. Its origins are the Latin words *manu operare* meaning 'to work by hand'.

mongrel: The first vowel is an *o* (although it sounds like it would be a *u*).

nuisance: Remember the *ui* to spell the 'yooh' sound. You could remind yourself that someone who is a *nuisance* is utterly irritating.

plait: Remember the *ai* spelling for the 'a' sound. The *i* is there because this word was once pronounced 'playt'. The pronunciation has changed but the spelling has not!

pleasant: Remember the *ea* spelling for the 'e' sound in the first syllable. This will be easy if you remember that *pleasant* things are things that *please* you.

quay: The 'ee' sound is spelt *ay*. Don't confuse *quay* with *key* which has the same sound.

queue: The unusual letter combination *eue* makes the 'yooh' sound. Also notice that *qu* makes a 'k' (not 'kw') sound at the start of the word. This is because *queue* comes from French. (It was based on the Latin word for 'tail' -- because a *queue* is often shaped like a tail.)

theory: Remember the *eo* spelling for the 'ear' sound. This comes from the Greek word *theoria*, meaning 'thinking' or 'idea'.

Susan Butler
The Editor
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