

Spelling Tips 3 – Spelling Rules

There are some rules that we can hang on to in the complexities of spelling. The only difficulty is that they all seem to have important exceptions. So, for example, the well-known 'i before e except after c' should really go on to say 'when the sound is ee'. The rule works perfectly well on words like *achieve* and *receive*, the first having *ie* and the second having *ei*, but breaks down on words which, at some stage, have been borrowed into English and don't conform to English sound/spelling patterns.

So, for example, *beige* comes from French and still has something like a French pronunciation with *ei* pronounced 'ay'. But *protein* is tricky because it comes from Greek and has ended up with an *ei* spelling and an 'ee' sound in English. It becomes an exception to the rule. In earlier times *seize* was written *sayse* and had a pronunciation much closer to the French *saisir* from which it came. Despite its current pronunciation it remains an exception because it is a French borrowing.

Similarly there is a simple rule that words of two or more syllables, where the final syllable is unstressed, do NOT double the consonant when they add *-ed* or *-ing*. So *billet* becomes *billeted* and *billeting*, and, strictly speaking, *focus* becomes *focused* and *focusing*. The exception to the rule is the set of words ending in *l*, such as *travel*, which becomes *travelled* and *travelling*.

The other side of this rule is that a word of two or more syllables, where the final syllable is stressed, DOES double the consonant, so that *admit* becomes *admitted* and *admitting*. But then the exception is the set of words which have a vowel represented by two letters, such as *repeat*, which do NOT double the final consonant. *Repeat* becomes *repeated* and *repeating*.

Try these memory tips:

believe Remember that **believe** has *ie* (to spell the 'ee' sound) following the *l*. This follows the rule that *i* comes before *e* except after *c*.

brief Remember that **brief** is spelt with *ie* (to spell the 'ee' sound). This follows the rule that *i* comes before *e* except after *c*. Think of similar words such as *thief* and *chief*.

budget Remember that the *t* remains single when you add *-ed* or *-ing*, following the rule that the consonant remains single if the final syllable is not stressed.

ceiling Remember that **ceiling** is spelt with *ei* (to spell the 'ee' sound). This follows the rule that *i* comes before *e* except after *c*.

plummet Notice that you do not double the *t* when you add *-ed* or *-ing*, following the rule that the consonant remains single if the final syllable is not stressed.

poltergeist This word breaks the rule that *i* comes before *e* except after *c* because it comes from German -- from *poltern* (meaning 'to make a disturbance') and *geist* (meaning 'ghost').

protein Remember that **protein** is spelt with *ei* for the 'ee' sound in the last syllable. This does not fit in with the rule that *i* comes before *e*, except after *c*. That is because **protein** has come from the Greek word *proteios*, meaning 'primary'.

science The *ie* after the *c* does not appear to follow the normal rule of *i* before *e* except after *c*. This is because the *i* and the *e* are part of two separate syllables in this word, rather than going together to make an 'ee' sound. **Science** comes from *scientia*, the Latin word for 'knowledge'.

seize Remember that **seize** is spelt with *ei*, breaking the rule that *i* comes before *e*, except after *c*.

weird Remember that **weird** is spelt with *ei*, breaking the rule that *i* comes before *e*, except after *c*. This is because the vowel sound is 'ear', not 'ee', and so the rule does not apply.

Susan Butler
The Editor
Macquarie Dictionary