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 eign (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’.

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