The pronunciation of English words is unfortunately no guide to spelling when it comes to single or double consonants. A word like aberration, for example, has a single b and a double r, but, from the sound alone, either would have been possible. The truth of the matter lies in the origin of the word – aberration comes from the Latin ab meaning ‘away from’ and errare meaning ‘to wander’. Something that is aberrant has wandered away from the right course.

A word like fulfil can be particularly irritating because on their own, both full and fill have the double letter but in the compound fulfil, neither does. While it is true that in Old English the form of full was ful, fill has always been fill. And indeed in American English fulfill is the only standard spelling.

The single/double letter variation is probably one of the hardest things to learn in English spelling because there is often no rhyme or reason to it -- just established practice. This is a category where little memory-joggers can be of great assistance. Accommodate can be tackled by remembering that a place can accommodate two children and two men, for example.

Try these memory tips:

accident There is a double c in accident but each c makes a different sound -- the first has a ‘k’ sound and the second an ‘s’ sound. If you remember this, you won’t make a spelling error accidentally.

atoll A single t and a double l. Think of having to pay a toll to land on the atoll.

dessert Two s’s. You could try thinking that they stand for ‘second serving’ and that is why they turn up in dessert which is something sweet to eat, but not in desert which is a dry, sandy place.

embarrass Remember that when you are embarrassed you feel doubly uncomfortable and there are two double letters in embarrass -- a double r and a double s.

holiday Only one l. This is because holiday comes from ‘holy day’ (the first holidays were special days in the Christian Church’s calendar). But remember that the y has changed to an i.

hurricane Double r. You will remember this if you think of the double r in hurry -- hurricanes are always in a hurry.

millibar Two l’s in the prefix milli- which means ‘thousandth’. In this word, this prefix is joined to the word bar. It can also be joined to other measurement words to make a word meaning a thousandth part of that measurement, as you can see in milligram, millilitre and millimetre.

parallel Only one r, then a double l, then a single l at the end. Remember single -- double -- single.

serrated Double r. Think of the ‘rough ridges’ of a serrated edge to remind you.

suffocate Double f. Also notice that the following vowel sound is spelt o. Think what a ‘fearful and frightening ordeal’ it would be to suffocate.

tariff Only one r, but double f (which you could think of as standing for ‘final fee’ to remind you).

Susan Butler
The Editor
Macquarie Dictionary