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.

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