

Sound Spellings by Word Origin

Teaching the Phonics of Each Language of Origin Alongside Morphology

A reference for tutors, teachers, and word lovers

Why Sort Spellings by Origin?

English spelling looks irregular when all of its words are mixed together. Sorted by language of origin, it becomes much more regular. Each language that fed into English brought its own spelling habits. Greek brought ph for f and ch for k. French brought ch for sh and -que for k. Latin brought ti for sh. A pattern that seems strange in one word turns out to be normal for its whole family.

That is why phonics and morphology work well together. When students learn a word root, they also learn the sound spelling that travels with it. A student who knows that Greek words use ph for f and y for ĭ can read and spell photograph, symphony, and physics as one group, and can make a good guess at their meanings.

English spelling also keeps a word part looking the same even when its sound changes: sign and signal, nation and native, magic and magician. Once students see the shared root, the "odd" letters make sense.

How to read this guide: Words are shown in 40L marked print. Gray letters are silent. Each origin section describes where the words came from and how they are built, then lists the main sound-spelling patterns with examples and teaching notes.

A Note on â

The symbol â stands for short e + r (ĕr), as in c_âre, fâir, beâr, thêre. In short words it is marked â to match McGuffey's markings. In longer words the r usually starts the next syllable, so the vowel is marked as a short e sound followed by r, to match the CMU dictionary and everyday pronunciation: p_ârĕnt, M_ârĭ, v_ĕrĭ. Both markings stand for the same sound. When teaching â, tell students it is really short e + r. Reference charts may list longer words such as aerial, bury, and paradigm under â so the whole spelling group stays together.

A Simple Teaching Routine

1. **Start with one pattern.** Show the pattern on the origin square (for example, Greek p_h for f).
2. **Read a small set.** Read five to eight marked words from that one origin.
3. **Split the words into parts.** Notice that the pattern lives in the root or affix (photo, graph, phone), so it shows up in every word built from that part.
4. **Build new words.** Combine known roots and affixes (tele + phone, photo + graph) and read the new words. The sound spelling carries over.
5. **Look for relatives.** Compare related words where the sound shifts but the spelling holds (sign / signal). See "When the Sound Changes but the Spelling Stays."

6. Sort and review. Sort a mixed list by origin clues, then check tricky words at etymonline.com. Keep each set small and review often. A few words learned well beat a long list forgotten.

Clues to a Word's Origin

Origin	Look for	Examples
Old English	Short, everyday words; kn, wr, gh, igh; th; compound words; -ness, -ful, -ly	knīght, t̃hūmb, slēepȳ, hōmewārd
Greek	ph for f; ch for k; y in the middle of a word; rh, ps, pn; -ology, -ism; roots like photo, tele, bio	p̃hōne, chōrūs, mȳth, psȳchōlōgȳ
Latin	Longer, academic words; prefixes like con-, in-, ex-, sub-; -tion, -ture, -ous; roots like struct, port, rupt	nātion, nātūre, attrāct, ēducatīon
French	ch for sh; -que; -ette; -eer, -ee; -age with a zh sound; silent final t or s; ou for ō	chēf, boutīque, ěngineēr, bāllet
Spanish	Final -o or -a; ll; ñ; j for h; -ito, -illa; food, ranching, animals, and Southwest landforms	tācō, mesa, cānyon, būrritō

Old English (Germanic) Origin

Old English is the base of our language. Most everyday words come from it: family words, body parts, farm and home words, numbers, and most short verbs. These words are usually one or two syllables long. English pronunciation changed a great deal after the Old English period while the spelling stayed put, so many "irregular" spellings are found here. The k in knight and the gh in night were once said aloud.

How the words are built: Old English rarely uses bound roots. Whole words join into compounds (house + wife, black + smith), and native prefixes (un-, over-, mis-, fore-) and suffixes (-ness, -ful, -less, -ly, -y) attach to whole words. See the morphology part of speech document.

Pattern	Examples	Notes
<i>Consonant spellings</i>		
ch	chīn, fētch	tch after a short vowel
qu (kw)	quēen	
gh for f	lāugh, ěnoūgh	gh was once a throaty sound, later f
th	tīs, thāt	voiced th
t̃h	t̃hīck, t̃hīn	unvoiced th
w̃h	w̃hȳ, w̃hēn	
<i>Many 2-letter vowel teams</i>		
ā	rāin, sāy	
ē	mēet, lēaf, fiēld	

Pattern	Examples	Notes
ī	tīe, heīght, steīn, buȳ	
ō	bōat, tōe, slōw	
ū	few, hūe	
ǣ	lǣugh	
ě	měant, hěifēr	
ǽ	tǽut, sǽw, brōad	
ōo	fōod, blew, bruiſe, true	
ōō	lōok, cōuld	
oi	boȳ, toȳ	
ōū	ōūt, tōwn	
<i>Silent letters (most were once pronounced)</i>		
gh	ghōst	
gn	gnāt, gnǽw	
kn	knōw, knīght, knēe	k was said in Old English
mb	līmb, lǣmb, t̃hūmb	
wr	wrīte, wrǣp, wrīst	
stle	brīstle, t̃hīstle, wrēstle	t is silent between s and le
<i>Endings and suffixes</i>		
-ōw	yēllōw	
-ȳ	bābȳ	
-ȳ (suffix)	rāinȳ, slēepȳ, sǣndȳ	The suffix -ȳ means "full of" or "like." It makes adjectives and says ē.
<i>Doubling after a short vowel</i>		
pp, ll, tt...	bēll, hīll; hōp → hōppīng, hōpped	A doubled consonant keeps the vowel short. Both letters are marked black.
one consonant	hōpe → hōpīng	Compare with hopping: one consonant after a long vowel. This is a suffix spelling rule.
<i>Plurals</i>		
vowel change	fōot / fēet, tōōth / tēēth, gōose / gēese, mōuse / mīce	Old English changes the vowel instead of adding -s
-en	chīld / chīldren, ōx / ōxen	an old plural ending
no change	shēep / shēep, deēr / deēr	

Teaching note: The silent letters in knight, write, and gnat can be a hook. They were real sounds in Old English, and the spelling is a record of that. Students tend to remember a "fossil" more easily than an exception.

Greek Origin

Greek words came into English mostly through Latin. Later, scientists and scholars borrowed them directly. They are common in science, medicine, math, and the names of new inventions. There are fewer Greek words than Latin ones, but their spelling patterns are very consistent and easy to spot.

How the words are built: Greek builds words by joining combining forms, often with a connecting o: photo + graph, tele + phone, micro + scope, bio + logy. The connecting o is often a schwa (photograph). Each combining form keeps its Greek spelling everywhere it goes, so learning phone means you can spell telephone, phonics, and symphony. Common Greek suffixes: -ology, -ic, -ism, -ist, -ize.

Pattern	Examples	Notes
Consonant spellings		
ch for k	chāōs, ěchō, chōrūs, chārāctēr, schōōl	
ph for f	phōne, phōtograph, tēlēphōne	Greek letter phi
th	thrōmbōsis, mýth, thērmōmētēr	Greek letter theta
Vowel teams		
au	autograph	auto = self
eū	eūrēka	
oē	amoēba, phoēnix	
Overuse of y (Greek letter upsilon)		
ȳ for ī	tȳpe, çȳcle, hȳdrant	
ŷ for ĭ	mŷth, sȳmbol, rhŷthm, sȳnonȳm	y in the middle of a word is a strong Greek clue
ÿ for ē	tĕchnōlōġÿ, bĭōlōġÿ	-ology ends in ÿ
Silent letters		
pn	pneumōniā	pneu = air, lung
ps	psȳchōlōġÿ	psych = mind
pt	ptērōdāctyl	ptero = wing
rh	rhīnō, rhŷthm	
mn	mnēmōniċ	mne = memory
Endings		
-ō	tēlēphōtō	
-e for ē	ācmē, apōstrophē	A final e that is spoken is a strong Greek clue.
Plurals		

Pattern	Examples	Notes
-īs → -ēs	crīsis / crīsēs	The ending changes to ēs.
-on → -a	crīterion / crīteriā, phēnōmenon / phēnōmena	

Teaching note: Build words in front of students: photo + graph, tele + phone, micro + scope, thermo + meter, psych + ology. Then read them. Students see that ph, ch, and y come with the root, not at random.

Latin Origin

A large share of English vocabulary comes from Latin, especially longer academic, legal, and scientific words. Latin came in through the church and scholarship, and a great deal of it came through French. Latin words are often longer, but their spellings are very regular once students know the roots and suffixes.

How the words are built: A Latin word is usually a root plus a prefix and/or suffix: con + struct + ion, in + spect + or, ex + port. The suffix often tells the part of speech (-tion = noun, -ous = adjective, -ate = verb). Many of the "soft" sounds below appear only when a suffix is added.

Pattern	Examples	Notes
<i>Consonant spellings</i>		
đ for j	ēduċāte	
mn	ċolūmn, āutūmn	n is heard in columnist and autumnal
sċ for s	vīſċerāl, dīſċiplīne	
ċ for s	ċell, ċent, ċity	c says s before e, i, or y
ċ for k	ċānīne, ċognītiōn	c says k before a, o, or u
x for gz	ēxāċt, ēxīst, ēxāmplē	ex- before a vowel says gz; before a consonant it says ks (extract, expel)
ī for ē	stādīūm, rādīūs	Romance ī
<i>Sounds made by suffixes</i>		
t for ċh	nātūre, quēſtiōn	-ture, -tion after s
t for ſh	nātiōn, āctiōn	-tion
ċ for ſh	ſpēċiāl, maġċiān	-cial, -cian
ſ for ſh	mīſſiōn	-ssion
<i>Doubled letters at the prefix seam</i>		
ad- → at-, af-	attrāċt, affēċt	The prefix changes its last letter to match the root, so the root's first letter looks doubled. Both letters are black, but you hear one sound.
in- → im-	īmōrtāl	

Pattern	Examples	Notes
con- → col-, cor-	collēct, cōrrēct	
sub- → suf-, sup-	sūffix, sūppōrt	
Endings		
-ō	vīdēō	
Plurals		
-ā → -ē	lārva, lārvaē	
-ūs → -ī	cāctūs, cāctī	
-ūm → -a	mēdiūm, mēdiā	

Teaching note: Double letters in words like attract and collect are hard to spell. Split the word into prefix and root (at + tract, col + lect) and the doubling makes sense. This works much better than memorizing the spelling letter by letter.

French Origin

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, French was the language of England's courts, law, government, and fine living for about 300 years. Older French borrowings now sound fully English (village, marriage, table). Words borrowed later, from the 1600s on, kept more of their French sounds (machine, chef, ballet, garage). French grew out of Latin, so many French roots overlap with Latin ones. Check etymonline.com when it matters which way a word came in.

How the words are built: French gave English many suffixes that make nouns and adjectives: -ette (small), -eer (one who does), -ee (one who receives), -age (action or collection), -esque (in the style of). See the morphology part of speech document.

Pattern	Examples	Notes
Consonant spellings		
ch for sh	chēf, machīne, pārachute, chāndelīer	
gn for ñ	vīgnētte	
zh	vīsiōn, mēasūre, rouge, āzūre, beige	
qu for k	boutīque, āntīque, ūnīque	Latin and French
Vowel spellings		
e for ā	feint, obey	
i for ē	machīne	Romance i
ay for ē	quay	

Pattern	Examples	Notes
ou for ōō	sou <u>p</u> , rou <u>t</u> e, sou <u>v</u> en <u>i</u> ř	
3-letter vowel teams		
ieu for ōō	lieu <u>t</u> ėn <u>a</u> nt	
iew for ū	vieu <u>w</u>	
au, aux, eau for ō	gauche (gō <u>sh</u>), faux (fō), bureau (būrō)	Respelled rather than marked
Silent letters		
h	hōnōr, hērb	
–s	de <u>br</u> is, ā <u>p</u> ropōs	The final letter is silent in French.
Endings		
–ette	ga <u>z</u> ette	–ette = small (kitchenette)
–ille	B <u>a</u> stille	
–arre	b <u>i</u> z <u>a</u> rr <u>e</u>	
–age	g <u>a</u> rage, m <u>i</u> rage	Newer borrowings: –age says āzh
–age	v <u>i</u> llage, m <u>a</u> rr <u>i</u> age	Older borrowings: –age sounds English. The suffix –age means action or collection.
–ue	v <u>o</u> gue, bou <u>t</u> i <u>q</u> ue	
–iē	ĉ <u>a</u> lōriē	
–et	b <u>a</u> ll <u>e</u> t, v <u>a</u> l <u>e</u> t, bou <u>q</u> u <u>e</u> t	t is silent
–ot	d <u>e</u> p <u>o</u> t	
–eur	s <u>a</u> b <u>o</u> te <u>u</u> r, <u>a</u> ma <u>t</u> eu <u>r</u>	
–e	s <u>o</u> rtiē	
–eer	ē <u>n</u> g <u>i</u> ne <u>e</u> r	one who does
–ee	ē <u>m</u> p <u>l</u> oy <u>e</u> e, r <u>e</u> f <u>u</u> g <u>e</u> e	one who receives

Teaching note: A silent final t or s (ballet, debris) and ch for sh (chef) are good clues that a word came from French. Students who know these clues can often read a French borrowing correctly the first time they see it.

Spanish Origin

Spanish words came into English through trade, exploration, and daily life in the American Southwest. Many name foods, ranching, animals, and landforms (mesa, canyon). Spanish spelling is very regular: each letter keeps its Spanish sound.

How the words are built: Spanish uses –ito, –ita, –illo, and –illa to mean "little." Mosquito is a little mosca (fly). Burrito is a little burro. Tortilla is a little torta (cake). Vanilla is a little vaina (pod), and an armadillo is a little armored one. Alligator comes from el lagarto, "the lizard."

Pattern	Examples	Notes
<i>Consonant spellings</i>		
j for h	junta	
ll	tortilla	In Spanish, ll sounds like y. English speakers often say it as l.
ñ	jalapeno	
ny for ñ	canyon	English spelling of Spanish cañón
u for w	iguana, pueblo	
qu for k	mosquito, tequila	Spanish uses qu for k only before e or i.
<i>Vowel spellings</i>		
i for ē	burrito, tequila, patio	Romance i
<i>Endings</i>		
-ō	pueblo, taco, tornado, rodeo	
-a	plaza, mesa, bonanza, vanilla	Final a is usually a schwa in English.

Teaching note: Spanish-speaking students already know many of these sound spellings. Point out the connection: the same letters that are "irregular" in English are regular in Spanish.

When the Sound Changes but the Spelling Stays

English spelling usually keeps a root looking the same even when adding a suffix changes how it sounds. This is the clearest place where phonics and morphology meet. When a spelling seems strange, look for a relative. A silent letter often "wakes up" in a related word, and a letter that changes sound is often keeping the root recognizable.

Base word	Related word	What changes
<i>Silent letters that speak in a related word</i>		
sign	signal, signature	The g is silent in sign but says g in signal.
bomb	bombard	The b is heard in bombard.
column	columnist	The n is heard in columnist.
hymn	hymnal	The n is heard in hymnal.
muscle	muscular	sc becomes sc. The c says k.
soft	soften	Here it goes the other way: t is heard in soft and silent in soften.
<i>Letters that change sound when a suffix is added</i>		
act	action	t → sh
select	selection	t → sh
magic	magician	c (k) → sh
music	musician	c (k) → sh

Base word	Related word	What changes
elēctric	elēctricity	c (k) → s
decide	decision	d → zh
divide	division	d → zh
<i>Vowels that change when a suffix is added</i>		
nātūre	nātūral	ā → ă
crime	criminal	ī → ĭ
wīse	wīsdōm	ī → ĭ
plēase	plēasant	ē → ě
child	children	ī → ĭ
knōw	knōwledge	ō → ǒ

Teaching note: Have students say both words and point to the letter that changes. The spelling stays the same because the meaning stays the same. This helps spelling too: the silent g in sign is easier to remember once students know signal.

Practice: Sort by Origin

Sort these words by language of origin using the clues in this guide. Then check your answers at etymonline.com or in the key below.

knīght	p̄hōtōgrāp̄h	nātion	chēf
mosquītō	t̄hūmb	rhŷthm	atrăct
boutīque	cănyon	slēepŷ	chōrŷs

Answer key: Old English: knight, thumb, sleepy. Greek: photograph, rhythm, chorus. Latin: nation, attract. French: chef, boutique. Spanish: mosquito, canyon.

Notes for Tutors and Word Lovers

- **Patterns are tendencies, not laws.** Fly and why use y for ī but come from Old English. Use the patterns to make good guesses, then check.
- **Latin or French?** Many words came from Latin by way of French, so their parts look Latin but they came into English through French. Etymonline.com shows the route a word took.
- **Mixed words.** Some words combine origins. Television is Greek tele (far) + Latin vision (seeing). Automobile is Greek auto + Latin mobile.
- **Keep sets small.** A few roots and patterns at a time, with frequent review, build better retention than long weekly lists.

Sources: Etymonline.com (Online Etymology Dictionary); Hanna et al., Phoneme–Grapheme Correspondences as Cues to Spelling Improvement (1966); Bishop, The ABCs and All Their Tricks. Markings follow 40L marked print.