

Former teacher knows do's and don'ts of spelling

BY DOUG HARRISON

The Acton Tanner

If you scored 100 per cent on your latest spelling test and are laughing it off as you read this because you have a penchant for memorizing the words 12 hours before crunch time, it'll only hurt you in the long run.

Even if the words rolled of your tongue at lightning speed.

Even if your memory box rates with the best of them.

Chances are, you do have a great memory. But, chances are, you don't understand the words you're writing and have failed to pick up certain patterns — either a rhyming one or a frequent sound at the end of the word that is common in several others.

"Spelling is word construction, not word memorization," says Acton's Jo Phenix, a former Peel Region teacher for 25 years and now co-author of books and a workshop leader for spelling instruction. "You can't just memorize words, you have to understand them. A lot of words sound the same and this is a good clue on how it's spelled."

As an example, Phenix, who researched pattern spelling for 10 years, uses the word spaghetti. She says it's an Italian word and has an "i" at the end like many Italian words.

"If you know where a word originates and why it's spelled that way, chances are you will remember the pattern and write it cor-

rectly," she states.

Over the years, one of the pitfalls for students has been that spelling has always been perceived as negative and has always worked against people to destroy their self-confidence. Teachers never reward a student with a 10 per cent bonus to their projects if the spelling is correct, says Phenix.

She adds that the ability to spell is merely to make an impression.

"If your spelling is poor, people won't think highly of you," reveals Phenix, who spent six years teaching high school, six in senior public and finished in Grade 1. "If you go shopping and broccoli is spelled wrong on your list, it doesn't matter because no one's going to see it. But, if you're filling out a resume, you want everything perfect."

Teachers have to get in and actively teach the children. Phenix says the lack of attention stems from a lack of instruction in teachers' college and overcrowded classrooms.

"Teachers' colleges don't teach the students to show kids the patterns in spelling, but in all fairness, there's not much time (nine months) for them to teach anything more than the job training stuff," she says.

"In writing, personal attention is very important. The smaller the class is, the better job a teacher will do," Phenix explains.

Instilling a little confidence in the youngster doesn't hurt, either.

"Some kids who aren't good at spelling and aren't confident, are afraid and therefore write small and as little as possible," says Phenix, who visited Nova Scotia recently for a teacher's seminar. "No one ever became a better writer by writing less. It's the kiss of death for learning."

Phenix adds that another way of getting more attention is to slice the current curriculum in half.

There are too many concepts of spelling being taught in a short time, she explains.

"When I was a consultant, the Grade 7 and 8's would have 40-minute classes and it was always reading and writing that got short changed," says a perturbed Phenix. "There should be more time spent on reading and writing."

The average and congested school day ultimately led to Phenix departing the senior public scene for the Grade 1's, whose spelling problems were more visible. She was also able to spend the entire day with the same students, which enabled her to pick up their patterns of spelling.

Phenix, who has appeared on educational shows for TV Ontario and CBC Radio, is the co-author of Impressions, the most successful language program in the world. It is the first Canadian reading series to be sold in the U.S.

"Once you've forgotten everything you memorized in school, what's left is your education," professes Phenix.



HARD WORK PAYS OFF: Acton's Jo Phenix has figured out the do's and don'ts of teaching spelling and has co-authored the book, *Spelling Instruction That Makes Sense*. Her solo effort for teachers is *Teaching Writing*. (Doug Harrison photo)



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