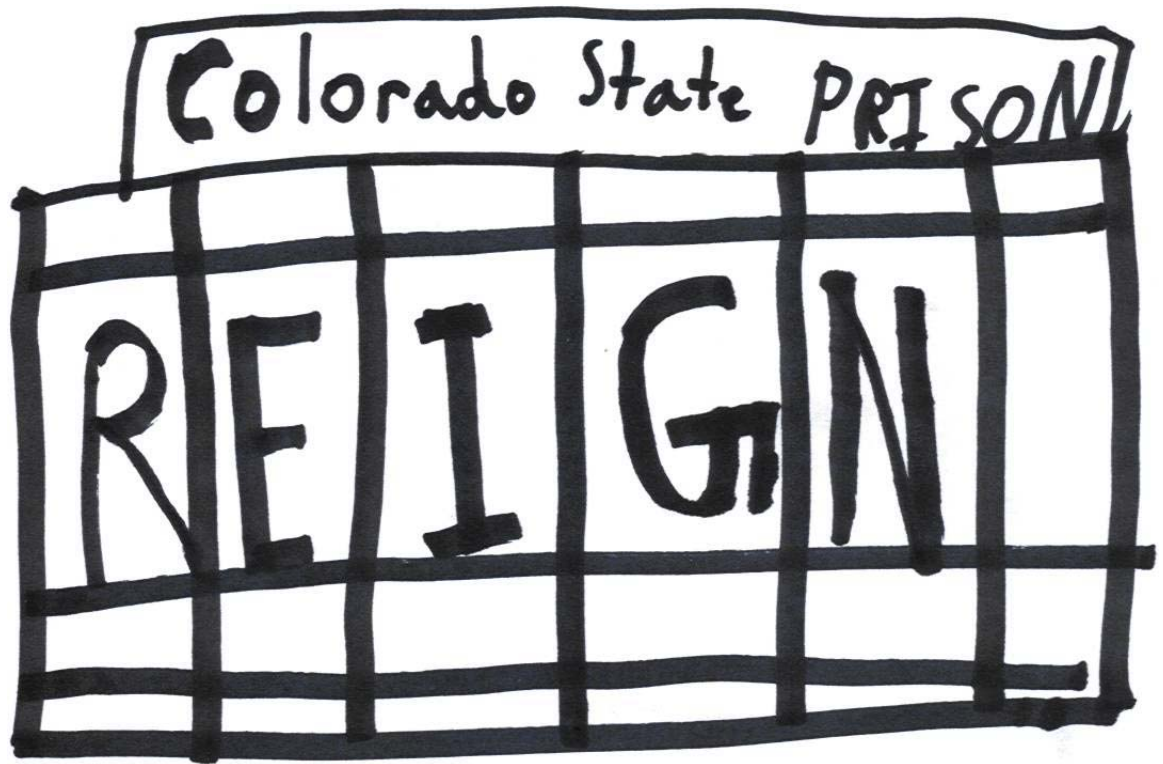

Visual-Spatial Learners and the Challenge of Spelling

Alexandra Shires Golon

When I present to parents, I have a Peanuts© cartoon I use that shows Charlie Brown in bed thinking, “Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Then a voice comes to me that says, ‘I before E, except after C!’” My poor son spent a lot of time memorizing this rule. Then he misspelled “species” on his test because he kept spelling it, “speceis.” (He did follow the rule, though, right?) Who makes up these crazy spelling rules, anyway? There are so many words that are spelled with rules that are broken or that make no sense—it seems silly to have the rule in the first place!

Spelling seems to be universally challenging for visual-spatial children and adults. Thank goodness for spell checkers. For those who think in images, not words, it can be very difficult to create pictures that incorporate letters, particularly pictures that will live on as memorable images in the visual learner’s mind. Color is a great tool for accomplishing this. Taking the “IE” in FRIEND and making them a different color, even larger type, helps to secure the rule, or for them the image, that, in this instance, the I precedes the E. This is an effective trick for nearly all spelling words, particularly those with unusual or rule-breaking spelling. My children once had a teacher who taught her students to actually place “rule-breaking” spelling words in jail, behind bars. The image of the word having been imprisoned for breaking the rules would stick in their memory. Here’s one my youngest did for the word, “reign” because the “g” is a rule breaker, serving little purpose in the spelling of the word:



However, if color or jail bars don't secure the image, try adding characters around the letters and creating a whole silly story around the word itself. Remember, humor will engage the right hemisphere; color and size will help it to be retained. For example, consider the word, "MOUNTAIN." There are several opportunities for creating actual mountains out of the letters M, N and A. Using a full piece of paper, write the spelling word using pictures of what the word represents. Perhaps our "MOUNTAIN" has climbers on the O or the I. A whole story can be created about the climbers ascending certain letters. Use any trick that will help the spelling of this word to stay in the child's visual memory. Enlist students' help in creating silly stories and drawings – this will make the images easier for them to remember. Don't place any boundaries on what their stories include – they need to create it, store it and be able to recall them, so let them use what works for them. My oldest son made up this silly story to remember how to spell, "friend" correctly:

FRIEND

“These FRiEs from FRIday’s sure taste good at the day’s end!”

“You’re right, FRiend!”

Or, as a mum in New Zealand recommended to me, try typing each spelling word you have on your computer in a different font. Pick a font that matches the feeling or mood of your word. So, serendipitous which sounds like a fun and interesting word, might look like this: *Serendipitous* Just be sure to use a font you can read!

If your visual-spatial children have successfully created an image of the word in their minds, they will be able to spell that word forward and backward. To test whether the image your children have created has a permanent, retrievable place in their memory (or file cabinet, as my son would say), ask your children to spell the word in reverse. If they can’t do it, they need to work on some other technique (color, humor, size, etc.) to secure their image of the word until they are able to spell it correctly forward and backward.

A Visualization Approach to Spelling*

*Borrowed from Neurolinguistic Programming

1. Write the spelling word in large print with bright-colored ink on a white piece of paper with the difficult part of the word written in a different color.
2. Hold the card in front of you as far as your arm can reach, a little bit above your eyes.
3. Study the word carefully, then close your eyes and see if you can picture the word in your imagination.

4. Now, do something wild and crazy to the word in your imagination – the sillier the better. (You could make it colorful, have the letters act like people or animals—anything that will help you remember how the word is spelled.)
5. Place the word somewhere in space, in front of you or above your head. Remember that there is an infinite amount of space around you that can hold an equally infinite number of words.
6. Spell your word backward with your eyes closed. Was there an even rhythm between the letters? Good! That means you are really looking at your picture.
7. Now spell your word forward with your eyes closed.
8. Open your eyes and write the word **once**.
9. Close your eyes again and see if your word is still where you placed it in space. It will stay there forever!

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It is not unusual for visual-spatial learners to have difficulty with spelling, so I want you to consider this. See if you can read the following paragraph. Don't try very hard, just quickly read the words:

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deson't mtttaer waht oredr ltteers in a wrod apear, the only iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltter be in the rghit pclae. The oethr ltteers can be a cmolpeet mses and you can sitll raed the wrod!

Apaprnelty, the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter, but raeds the wrod as a wlohe. Ins't taht amzanig? So mcuh for the ipmorancte of spleling!

Something to think about if your child has difficulty spelling!

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