"How Do You Spell Caught?"

by

CONNE BRODERICK

"How do you spell caught?"

"Just spell it the best way you can and we'll fix it later."

My second-through-fourth grade learning disabled students in our working class suburban school district had a hard time writing stories. I learned about their stories from their elaborate drawings, during conferencing, and, fortunately, during sharing time when many could read or tell about them. But even with a working knowledge of invented spelling I was usually unable to read their pieces on my own. It appeared to me these students simply developed their own individual forms of creative graphophonic notations. I wondered how I was going to help them be responsible editors of the own writing (Giacobbe, 1984).

I proceeded to teach a mini-lesson modeling proof-reading and editing for spelling following the sequence espoused by Donald Graves and other writing experts:

1. Look for misspelled words.
2. Circle them.
3. Write the correct spelling above the circled word.
4. Look up the words you don't know in the dictionary.

My students listened attentively. This seemed to be so easy. As they practiced, however, I noticed they did not follow the textbook example. Peter said he had no misspelled words. Michael circled only the correctly spelled words. And Alan looked up the word drive in the G section of the dictionary! Good Heavens! There were fifteen misspelled words in Peter's piece. Couldn't he see them? Did Michael understand the directions? Why was Alan looking in the Gs to spell drive?

My ego deflated. Maybe this "writing process" idea wasn't going to work with L.D. students. But I had been "born again" to writing as a process in the Pennsylvania Writing Project Summer Institute at West Chester University, so I determined to work it out. I knew from my experience that learning disabled students can and do learn but that they need a different, more structured approach. My reading and my students helped me discover a technique for correcting their spelling on their own.

The next day I put one of my own short stories on the overhead. It contained many misspelled words. First, I explained to the students that I liked how my story sounded but I knew I had misspelled some words and needed their help to find and correct them. After I read the story out loud to them I held out a green overhead marker and asked, "Who wants to circle the first misspelled word?" Scott found one immediately. He
actually enjoyed finding a mistake the teacher made. He came up and circled it with the colored marker. That motivated Michael, Jessica, and Nicky to each find one too. Then I wrote one of the misspelled words on the board. I enjoined their help to discover the correct spelling.

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<td>LC-like</td>
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<td>12/8</td>
<td>LOCT - liked</td>
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<td>12/19</td>
<td>L - like</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/10</td>
<td>LICT - liked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/21</td>
<td>LIKE</td>
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Figure 1. Spelling lexicon by Susan Sowers from *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* by Donald Graves, 1983. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Reprinted with permission.

I had read in Donald Graves’ book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983) about some research done by Susan Sowers in which she made spelling lexicons of first grade writing (Figure 1). The children she observed discovered the correct spelling of a word without any formal spelling instruction, sometimes taking as much as three months to discover *and*. Toni and Sarah constantly invented and reinvented until the discovery was made.

I was intrigued by this phenomenon. I even noticed myself that my own students were doing it, as in the case of Terry, a first grader, when he wrote the story *Green Socks and Red Socks* (Figure 2). He reinvented the spelling for *socks* each time he used the word.

Temple, Nathan & Burris found that all children spontaneously write invented spellings. By the time they reach transitional spelling, Henderson and Beers noticed that they begin to realize that pronunciation is not the major control on English spelling. Children become more aware of the rules through repeated exposure to the written words and through their own experimenting with respelling to make their productions look correct (Temple, 1987). Sowers (Graves, 1983) found in her research that correct spelling resulted from a visual or rule factor. Usually when we are unsure of a spelling we naturally rewrite it to identify the correct visual image. I constantly rewrite occasion, occasion, occasion to get the visual reassurance of correctness.

Based on this research I decided to teach my students the process by which we naturally determine the spelling of words. We don’t always use the dictionary initially and they certainly couldn’t with their unusual graphic combinations. I planned to teach them to rewrite the unknown word until it looked right, the strategy we naturally use. They would discover the correct spelling of their misspelled words by inventing and reinventing until they discovered the correct spelling.

I demonstrated at the board how I would discover the correct spelling of a word. I wrote the word *peces*. I told my students that I didn’t think it looked right. I tried writing it again *peces*. I asked them if it looked right.
Peter spelled cot-caul but seemed stuck. So I asked him “Which part looks correct?” He underlined cau.

“Something’s missing,” he said.

“Where should it be?” I asked. I was surprised he knew right where the gh should be. Believing that spelling impacted on the visual modality, I felt he had enough information to find the word caught in the dictionary using cau rather than col.

This was a perfect time to teach dictionary skills, where the students could actually apply the skills rather than practice them in isolation over and over for no apparent reason. Peter used his strong visual skills to find the word quickly and easily on the page now that he knew where to look. He copied the correct spelling under the CHECK column.

At other times I noticed that the students did not have the graphophonically skills necessary to discover the correct spelling to even look it up in the dictionary, as is suggested by the spelling for turkey (trkea) by Alan.

It still didn’t. I rewrote it again peices, pieces. Finally, I decided pieces looked the best. We checked it in the dictionary to be sure. Thus evolved my WRITE THINK CHECK format. As a class we tried another one with the students suggesting possible spellings until they discovered the correct one. We checked it in the dictionary to be sure. I felt they were ready to try a word on their own.

First, I gave each student a colored fine tip marker. I asked them to find one word in their piece that didn’t look right and circle it (Figure 3). This time they all found one.

Next, I explained to them that we often make spelling errors because we’re in a hurry to get our thoughts down on paper. When we take the time to think about it, it may be easier to recall the correct spelling. They sectioned off a piece of paper into thirds. WRITE THINK CHECK headed each section. They wrote the misspelled word under the WRITE section. Under the THINK section they wrote and rewrote the word up to four times until it looked right. They circled the one that looked best.

I walked around to see how I could help and learned. Alan spelled hof-hare, wet-went, and lake-like right away in the WRITE column (Figure 5). He didn’t even have to discover it under the THINK column.

**Figure 3.** Alan circled some of his misspelled words with a fine tip colored marker of his choice.

**Figure 4.** Circled words were looked up in the dictionary or supplied by the teacher.
Then I would tell them the correct spelling by writing it in the CHECK column for them (Figure 5).

Thus evolved my Spelling Editing Technique. Peter was able to identify the misspelled words and often corrected them at least well enough to look them up in the dictionary. Alan was the most surprising. He often spelled many words correctly on the first try, as did Anthony who didn't complain about correcting spelling now. This was a real ego booster to them that they really did know how to spell! After Alan finished the Spelling Editing Technique he corrected the misspelled words in his piece by writing the correct spelling above the crossed out misspelled words (Figure 6).

I have used this technique over the past eight years and found it to be quite successful for most students. It's a strategy that provides a structure for students to do what adults do naturally: determine the correct spelling of a word by rewriting it until it looks right.

These editing checklists were telling me what my students knew and what they needed to know. Sometimes I had individual spelling mini-lessons with students to teach them a particular phoneme. At other times I taught a small group if they all had the same need. I used these words then as spelling words for the next week's spelling lesson. These were words they knew but just needed to practice more. One kind of testing took the form of correcting the misspelled words on their written piece.

As in all innovative teaching techniques, this is not a cure-all for all student editing. Michael, whose dis-
ability stems from a visual perceptual deficit, tried very hard but this was not the best technique for him. He continued to have difficulty discriminating which words were spelled correctly and which were not.

I've incorporated this as a regular editing technique in my classroom. Now my students know when their stories sound right they use the Spelling Editing Technique to make them look right. We proofread and edit just like the experts suggest, only we've added one structured step to promote success:

1. Look for the misspelled words.
2. Circle them.
3. Use the Spelling Editing Technique.
4. Use the dictionary to check the spelling.
5. Write the correct spelling above the circled word.

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**References**


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