

Lesson 4.2 Weird Spellings Explained

key words: language change, spelling, history of English, Latin

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2g Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed to check and correct spellings. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

Did you know that the “k” in words like *know*, *knight*, *knock*, and *knot* used to be pronounced? K-nock K-nock! Our spelling system used to match our pronunciation much more closely – all those so-called silent letters such as the “e”s at the ends of lots of words, including *like*, *some*, *cane*, and *rake*; the “b” in words like *dumb*, *comb*, and *climb*; and even the “gh” in words like *thought*, *though*, *caught*, used to be pronounced.

But language changes. All languages are in a constant state of gradual change. Much of our spelling system reflects the pronunciation of people who were speaking English 1000 years ago when it was just beginning to be written down. So often the language changes, but the spelling doesn’t.

Do you think we should revise the spelling system so that it better matches our pronunciation? What would be some good things about this? What would be some problems?

Sometimes those who wrote down our language got spellings wrong – and now we’re stuck with those weird spellings. This has happened throughout the history of English, but happened quite a bit in the 18th century. Scholars were obsessed with the ideas of Ancient Greece and Rome, and they wanted English to borrow not only many words and word roots from both Greek and Latin, but also spellings. They felt this gave English more credibility if it shared some spelling conventions with these respected (though dead!) languages. So, for example,

English got the word *debt* from the French word *dette*. However, it had originally come into French from Latin *debere*, meaning ‘to owe,’ so the was added into the English spelling beginning sometime after about 1400. The *King James Bible*, from the early 17th century, has spellings with the and without, as well as other variations: *detter*, *debter*, *debtor*, and *debtour* all appear.

Sometimes these Latin respellings did not affect pronunciation, as with the in *debt*. Other times, the new spelling did alter pronunciation so that the modern spelling and pronunciation match up a bit better; for example, *adventure*, came from Middle English *aventure*, but the <d> (from Latin *aduentas*) was put back in in both spelling and then in speech. So if you have problems with the spelling of some of these words, it’s not your fault! Blame those 18th century scribes!

Look up the following words on the *Online Etymological Dictionary* to discover their previous spellings and their languages of origins.

salmon, receipt, island, indict, solder, often, Wednesday, asthma, colonel