

# How SpellCheck and AutoCorrect are Destroying Kids' Grammar

One thing school-aged parents can agree upon is their dissatisfaction with the lack of writing instruction their children receive in grade school. Writing rules, language arts, essay composition, sentence structure, punctuation, style—all of these things have come up in casual conversations with parents you bump into at the store, in the parking lot, and on the sidelines at sports events.

The penultimate question always seems to be the same: Parents want to know why their elementary school, middle school, and high school students have no idea how to write (anyone seen an iPhone in a kid's hand lately? But I digress.). One mom spoke of a son being “completely” unprepared for high school writing assignments despite having attended a well-regarded private school. A father described a total lack of knowledge of the writing process by his sixth grade son, an otherwise strong student. He can't write a well-crafted five-paragraph essay, the father said.

These parents aren't asking schools to turn their kids into the next Lincoln or Longfellow. But they do all seem to be wondering when their children will learn the concrete and century-old “elements of style” (and be introduced to William Strunk Jr.'s timeless [guide](#) of the same name).

I can still remember sitting in Sr. Pauline's classroom in sixth grade in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, diagramming sentence after sentence after sentence—prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, modifiers, particles, and spelling. Make a mistake and she was likely to throw an eraser across the room and zing you in the noggin. But we learned how to write

sentences, then paragraphs, and eventually reports.

The author Margaret Atwood once [said](#), “A word after a word after a word is power.” This may be true, but this power is illusory if you select the wrong words, order the words incorrectly, and misspell the words. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first draft of a call to arms after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor did not contain the word “infamy.” December 7, 1941, was a date which would “live in world history.” Yes, word choice matters. Spelling matters too.

British officials recently met [outrage](#) over proposed new standards that would require all 5<sup>th</sup> graders to accurately spell 100 words. The new standard was deemed “discriminatory” for students who fail English, are learning English as a second language, or are dyslexic. As for the rest of the students, spelling words correctly, some protested, will curb their creativity.

My eight-year-old son, who has become entranced by the podcast series *Serial*, asked me why it was named after a breakfast food when it was about a soldier lost in Afghanistan. I explained it was “serial” not “cereal.” [Lewis Carroll](#), who penned the famous exchange between March Hare, the Hatter and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, highlighted the importance of word sequence and meaning:

*“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.*

*“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”*

*“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “You might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’”*

The lesson here is that the use of language is a skill that is perfected with vehement practice not languid run-ins. Spelling—and the artful distinctions among words, their

meanings, and placement—is just one part of this process. And yet, some educators point to research that they claim shows that students learn to correct their own spelling over time with more reading (or hit a grade where everything moves to an iPad and autocorrect becomes your own personal writing coach).

A recent [op-ed](#) in *The Philadelphia Tribune* that appeared during the annual Scripps Howard Spelling Bee examined the place of spelling in schools and curricula. The writer asks how spelling is addressed in our schools today, and the friend who works at an elementary school responded: “Are you kidding me; little or nothing is being done to provide instruction to kids in spelling today.” Others reinforced this truth:

*Spelling as a standalone subject has basically disappeared. Some teachers spend time teaching spelling while others do not. Where spelling is emphasized, it is a component of reading programs or other language arts subjects. Many school districts believe that students learn to spell through daily reading and writing.*

Spelling tests—and strict adherence to making students understand why spelling (and clarity of meaning) are vitally important to convey one’s ideas—are disappearing. So too, it would seem, is the family commitment to helping children master spelling. In earlier eras, “Mothers sometimes prepared flash cards that they secured to the refrigerator for review. Frequently, parents called them out for their children to spell as dinner was being prepared or as they sat at the dinner table. In other settings, such as sitting on the porch after dinner, your parents sat close by on the glider going over the spelling list with you so that you were prepared for an upcoming spelling test.”

These rules—spelling, grammar, word usage, punctuation—aren’t old-fashioned or unnecessary, even in the era of spellcheck and autocorrect. They are the scaffolding upon which ideas are

built. And parents should insist on spelling tests and pack up those flashcards for the next long drive to grandma's house. If our children fail to learn the rules of writing, all they will have at the end of their school days is a collection of favorite emojis, social media posts, and misspelled (and abbreviated) text messages; and we will have no way of knowing whether they had any real ideas or beliefs, and whether those ideas could be communicated in such a way as to persuade others of their worth. The loss would be ours—and theirs.

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