The Article of the Month

by Robert Dilts.

THE NLP SPELLING STRATEGY

Spelling is an important and fundamental language skill that does not come "naturally" to everyone. In fact, intelligent people who otherwise excel in the classroom, even in language abilities, may experience strong and even debilitating difficulties in spelling. According to **NLP** ability with spelling is not a function of some kind of 'spelling gene' but rather the structure of the internal cognitive strategy one is using as one spells. Thus, if people experience difficulty with spelling, it is not because they are *'stupid*,' *'lazy*' or '*learning disabled*' but rather because they are trying to use an ineffective mental program.

I myself had difficulties spelling even up through my college years, even though I didn't experience problems in other subjects. Using the NLP model I eventually discovered an effective strategy that not only improved my own spelling but has been able to produce extremely effective results with other spelling students of all ages.

Since I was teaching the concept of modeling in my NLP courses I often used spelling as an example of a simple and easily testable mental strategy. I would bring up good and poor spellers in front of the class in order to observe and demonstrate the differences in their mental strategies. It soon became very obvious that good spellers had a very consistent strategy and accompanying set of accessing cues. The vast majority of them tended to look up and to their left while searching for the spelling. According to NLP this indicates an accessing strategy of remembered visual imagery ($\mathbf{V^r}$). When asked how they knew that their spelling was correct, many of them, as expected, did not know consciously how they knew it but said simply, "*I just **feel** that it **looks** right*." This would indicate a relationship between the kinesthetic and visual system. Further, if shown a page of writing containing a number of incorrectly spelled words, good spellers often claimed, "*It makes me **feel uncomfortable** to **see** all of those misspellings*," again indicating a visual and kinesthetic overlap. The fact that it was mentioned that seeing the misspelling made them feel uncomfortable suggests that the image causes the feeling and thus comes first in the sequence ($\mathbf{V->K^i}$).

Confirmation of this hypothesis came from those that were conscious of their internal strategy who reported seeing a mental image of the word accompanied by feeling of familiarity. The availability and clarity of the image along with the strength of the feeling determined their degree of confidence about the correctness of the spelling.

Poor spellers, on the other hand, had a variety of strategies - although none were the same as the strategy of the good spellers. In fact sometimes they would even vary those strategies in the middle of trying to spell a word. Many times this lead to inconsistency, extra effort, and frustration. Furthermore, as I had discovered as a child, creative spelling was not rewarded like creative writing was.

The most common strategy of poor, but not hopeless or disabled spellers, was trying to sound out the correct spelling through breaking the sound of the word down into small enough pieces that they sounded like letters. This is called "phonics" (pronounced "puh-hon-iks" if you sound it out phonically). While phonics has a number of important features (for example, making a guess at the spelling of word one has never seen before), it is not the best strategy for spelling words in English since many words are not written like they sound, and the exceptions do not follow consistent verbal rules.

This was, in fact, the strategy that I had meticulously learned when I was in grammar school. I had been taught to spell by sounding out. I have to admit I was a bit concerned when I first discovered one could not correctly spell the name of the method using the method (my first try came out "*fonix*"). My consternation grew, however, as we began with basics - such as the names of the first ten numbers. Instead of "*wun*" the first number was spelled 'one' (that looked like it should be pronounced "*oh-nee*"). There was no 'W' and an extra "silent E." The second number, instead of being spelled "*tu*" like it sounded, was spelled 'two' (As the comedian Gallagher points out, perhaps that was where the

missing "W" from 'one' had gone). After 'three' ("*tuh-ree*"), 'four' ("*fow-er*") and 'five' ("*fi-vee*") I knew something was wrong, but being young, I figured it was probably just something wrong with me. In fact, when 'six' and 'seven' came along I started to build back some hope - but then they struck with 'eight' ("*ee-yi-guh-hut*") and I felt like the next number looked as if it should sound - 'nine' (a "*ninny*").

When I discovered years later that good spellers simply remembered how the word looked, I actually thought it was cheating. It didn't involve any effort, you didn't have to start from scratch each time you spelled - it seemed too easy.

Incidentally, even if the English language was completely phonetically based and phonics was 100% accurate, a visual strategy would still be more effective and easy since vision functions much more rapidly for visual material. In fact, I have interviewed a number of copy editors - people who are professional spellers - and have never encountered a single one who claimed to begin at the top of the page and sound out all of the words in order to know if they are correct. Rather, every one of them claims that they simply look down the page and the misspellings "*jump out*" at them.

This visual strategy worked so well I began to have the poor spellers and even people diagnosed as learning disabled or dyslexic try it out. To learn a word they were having trouble with, I instructed them to look at the correct spelling, move their eyes up and to the left and visualize it in their mind's eye. In order to associate the spelling with the feeling of familiarity, I would have them first think of something else they were already confident and familiar with in order to access a positive feeling state. Then when they looked at the word, it would become anchored to the positive feeling instead of the feeling of effort or frustration (as often becomes associated with spelling). People tend to automatically remember things that make them feel good. Sure enough, people who had always had trouble spelling were able to spell and retain even very difficult words.

Of course, these simple instructions were not always enough. Adults especially had a fair amount of 'unlearning' to do. Often they would habitually and unconsciously try to use the old 'sounding out' strategy, which lead to confusion and conflict in trying to spell. To combat that tendency, I began to have them spell **backwards** as well as frontwards. It is very difficult to sound things out backwards (for example, try to figure out what '*Albuquerque*" sounds like backwards). The auditory representational system is very time dependent for perception, and sound tends to propagate in a particular sequence. The visual system, on the other hand, is more simultaneous. For example, think of which letter comes three letters after "**P**" in the alphabet. Now think of which letter comes three letters before "**P**" in the alphabet. If you primarily remember the letters of the alphabet utilizing the "**ABC**" song most English speakers learn as a child, you probably experienced much more difficulty identifying that "**M**" is the the letter that comes three letters before "**P**". People that use an auditory strategy such as this, sometimes even have to go all the way to the beginning of the alphabet and come forward in order to find the answer. Something visual maintains it shape whether we look at it *left-to-right* or *right-to-left*. Thus, if someone could read the letters of a word off backwards (i.e., from right-to-left) one could be pretty certain that person had a reasonably clear image of it in mind.

Strategies Versus Techniques

It is important to remember that there is a difference between a strategy and a mnemonic technique. A strategy involves setting a fixed outcome with a variable means to achieve it. One continues varying these mental operations until the image is fixed in the mind's eye. Memory techniques tend to be fixed means, or processes that produce variable outcomes. People end up concentrating more on what to do in order to remember the information than on the information itself. The NLP strategy involves the variation of fundamental sensory processes that require no training to learn. People often have to learn to *remember the memory techniques* before they can use to remember what they have learned them for.

Good spelling is function of learning how to learn new words. Just as soon as the grammar school student learns his ten words for the week, sure enough if someone doesn't give him ten more words. In fact, it is important to emphasize the fact it is a process when teaching it as a strategy. Sometimes a person who has just learned how to spell some difficult words, will say, "*Well I know how to spell **those** words now but that doesn't make me a good speller*." This is true as far as the content goes, but I remind them that they also know a process for **how** to learn new spelling words now, which is a very different level from simply having learned those words. As opposed to a 'drill-and-practice'

approach, NLP focuses on the process of learning. It is like teaching someone how to fish as opposed to giving them a fish. As the wise saying points out, "*If you give someone a fish, you have fed him for a day - if you teach him how to fish, you have fed him for the rest of his life*."

In many ways this orientation toward 'mental programming' makes it easier to adapt NLP to computerized instruction. In fact, I have made the basic spelling strategy into a computer program. The program follows the basic format described above. It shows the student the correct spelling of a word in a color selected by the student. The student is instructed to look up and to their left hand side and visualize the word in his or her mind's eye. After typing in the word left-to-right, the student is instructed to type in the spelling starting on the right hand side and moving to the left. The program is quite simple but has demonstrated significant results.

Other Factors Influencing Spelling

As a specific mental capability spelling is subject to be influenced by deeper psychological processes such as beliefs and identity issues. For instance, one useful belief I like to offer a new speller is that if they can spell these difficult words frontwards and backwards, simple words will be even that much easier and effortless.

Belief and identity issues can come up in interesting ways. I once taught this spelling strategy to a man in his mid-thirties. After spelling words he had struggled with for years both frontwards and backwards he responded, "Now I know I can spell, but I don't think I'll use it very much." Surprised, I asked him why. He said "Well, I really don't want to become a stiff and insensitive person." Not being able to quite relate this in an obvious way to learning to spell I explored the issue further and discovered that he had a particularly insensitive spelling teacher when in his early years at school, and had unconsciously associated being concerned about proper spelling with being uncaring about the person learning to spell, which conflicted with the kind of person he felt himself to be.

Another man in his forties had a similar resistance when it came to actually learning an appropriate spelling strategy. He had a particularly difficult time with a teacher in his grammar school years and discovered that he still carried the belief that it would somehow be a violation of his own personal integrity to finally learn to spell claiming that he would be *"finally giving in to that S.O.B. after all these years*."

In both of these cases these beliefs were fairly easily dealt with once they were uncovered. But one can see that such beliefs could create a large amount of unconscious resistance if not addressed.

At the identity level I have found that most good spellers perceive their success as a statement about their identity and their failures as a specific behavior. In other words, they tend to think, "*If I spell it right it is something that I did. If I spell it wrong it was just a mistake*." Problem spellers tend to think, "*If I spelled it wrong it was something that I did. If I spelled it right, it was just luck*." Some schoolchildren also associate scholastic capability with being a particular type of person (i.e., a teacher's pet, etc.) and thus resist learning the capability of spelling because it reflects on their perception of their identity. In other words, it is sometimes more important to first have a student see himself (or tell himself or feel himself to be) a good student in a way that does not conflict with the other elements of his identity, before working to teach him how to spell specific words. While there are a number of NLP techniques designed to accomplish this, they are beyond the scope of this article.

Also see the NLP Pattern of the Month or the Archives if you are interested in checking out NLP in more depth.

You also may want to visit the Anchor Point Page. **Anchor Point** is the practical journal of NLP.

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