Spelling rules for kids: the 10 that cover the most words

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Ten English spelling rules for kids that cover thousands of words, from dropping the silent e to doubling letters, with the exceptions and free practice lists.

English spelling looks chaotic, but ten rules cover thousands of words: drop the silent e before -ing, double a final consonant after a short vowel, change y to i, add -es after s, x, z, ch and sh, and a handful more. Each is below with examples and the exceptions to watch for. Peabody's Spelling Bee has free word lists by grade and pattern to practise them, free through the end of 2026.

The ten rules

1. Drop the silent e before a suffix that starts with a vowel. make ? making, hope ? hoped. Keep it before a consonant: hope ? hopeful.
2. Double the final consonant after a short vowel. hop ? hopping, run ? runner. One short vowel, one final consonant, a vowel suffix: double it. Practise with the double letters list.
3. Change y to i before most suffixes. happy ? happiness, baby ? babies. But keep the y before -ing: crying.
4. Add -es after s, x, z, ch and sh. boxes, wishes, buses. You can hear the extra syllable.
5. Many words ending in f become -ves. leaf ? leaves, wolf ? wolves. Not all: roofs, chiefs. See tricky plurals.
6. C is soft before e, i and y. cent, city, cycle; but cat, cot, cut. G often follows: gem, giant.
7. Use -ck right after a short vowel. back, duck, sick. Otherwise, k: bake, milk.
8. Q is almost always followed by u. queen, quick, quiet.
9. English words hardly ever end in v. have, give, love: they add an e.
10. I before e, except after c (mostly). believe, receive. Also ei when it says "ay": neighbor. Exceptions to learn by heart: weird, seize, their. The ie and ei list has more.

How to teach them

One rule a week works well. Introduce it with five words that follow it, then two that break it, and talk about why the exceptions are odd (often they came from another language). Then practise: Peabody's Bee Practice reads a word aloud and the speller builds it from letter tiles.

Rules versus memory

Rules help with words a child has never seen. But the most common words are often the ones that break them (said, friend, because), and those are best learned by heart. The fifteen most commonly misspelled words each come with a memory trick. For a break from spelling,

Peabody's library has stories at every reading level.

A week of practice for one rule

Here's how a family or class might spend a week on rule 2, doubling after a short vowel:

- Monday: read hop, hopping; run, runner; big, biggest. Say what happened to the last letter.
- Tuesday: sort ten words into "doubles" and "doesn't double" (hope, hoping goes in the second pile, because hope has a long vowel and a silent e).
- Wednesday: practise the double letters list in Bee Practice.
- Thursday: write five sentences using -ing words.
- Friday: a quick spelling test of ten words, five that double and five that don't.

The contrast on Tuesday is where most of the learning happens: a rule makes sense when you see the words it doesn't apply to.

Questions grown-ups ask

At what age should kids learn spelling rules?

Most children meet the first ones (silent e, -es plurals) in first and second grade, and the doubling and y-to-i rules by third or fourth. The grade lists on the Spelling Bee page follow that order.

Is "i before e except after c" even true?

As a rule of thumb, yes, for many common words. It has well-known exceptions, so teach it with them, not instead of them.

Are your word lists the same as the national bee's study list?

No. Peabody's lists are its own. If your child's school gave you a list, the my word list page lets a grown-up add it on this device.

Should my child learn rules or just memorise words?

Both. Rules help with new words; common irregular words are best learned by heart. Most good spellers use a mix without thinking about it.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/spelling-rules-for-kids