

First Scrabble, Now Wordle: Something for Everyone

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Word games and activities can be serious or funny, simple or complex. No longer just a school-time focus, paying attention to letters, words, and language can be a friends-and-family activity. Wordle, the popular *New York Times*' online puzzle, is one such example. During the pandemic and the resulting lockdown that altered a sense of normalcy, social media connected people and brought individuals together in unexpected ways. Wordle's popularity became a conversation topic on Facebook and other media platforms. While Wordle is a contemporary manifestation of a spelling game, it was not the first. Those who enjoy language games can thank architect Alfred Butts (1931), who, when unemployed during the 1930s, decided to create a word game. At that time, games were based on dice, cards, or tokens, such as checker pieces, and often involved numbers or words (Greenway, 2021). His Scrabble game generated other word spinoffs—including Wordle. Wordle's popularity gave rise to Lingo, a copycat prime-time television show that draws heavily on the Wordle formula of five-letter words that, if guessed correctly, result in cash prizes (Lingo, 2020).

In this essay, the authors collaborate to share their experiences with an online word game. The first author, a novice elementary English Language Arts (ELA) teacher reflects on the transformational power of Wordle with her school-aged daughters. The second author, a veteran ELA teacher at the college level, adds to the conversation. As two avid Wordle players, they share their perspectives about the power of words to bring folks together and offer helpful hints, which might inspire classroom teachers to think more intentionally about pedagogical decisions that highlight the playful nature of language and improve student understanding about the orthographic structure in English.

Teaching young children alphabets and aspects of the English written system need not be tedious. Further, learning about letter patterns reinforces decoding skills and empowers them as users of language, especially with word games. The connection between English orthography, or spelling knowledge, and word games suggests that the casual or serious Wordle player can call upon letter pattern knowledge to make strategic guesses. Rather than suggesting odd letter sequences—such as BD in initial position—game participants can draw on their knowledge of actual letter combinations. Knowing orthographic patterns helps discover the mystery Wordle word.

A Family Affair

It was 2021, and I (first author), like many of my relatives, was addicted to my morning Wordle ritual. Wordle (2024), a game much like Hangman or Mastermind, tasks the player with guessing missing letters in a word. A web-based word game created by Welsh software engineer Josh Wardle, Wordle can be played individually or with others. Players have six attempts to guess a five-letter word and are given feedback for each guess in the form of colored tiles that indicate when letters match their correct position (Wordle, 2024). Knowledge of letter patterns helps immensely. For example, if a correct final letter is *h*, knowing a bit about the alphabet can inform the possibility of the fourth letter. Since *th*, *ch*, and *sh* are typical combinations, guessing *t*, *c* or *s* makes for good strategy. Likewise, if the first letter is a vowel, chances are good that the second letter will be a consonant. Knowing that in English an initial vowel is usually followed by a consonant is evident in *other*, *apron*, *igloo*, or *usual*. Part of the appeal of the game rests with players competing against an invisible opponent; players take pride in figuring out the word before their limited number of guesses expires (Moats, 2000; Moats, 2020).

Besides the competition with oneself, Wordle players are only given one puzzle per day, which makes the task of guessing correctly even more exciting. As I began playing Wordle daily, my children became intrigued. They observed their grandmother, aunt, and me eagerly chatting about that day's Wordle riddle, whether we solved it, and how many guesses it took. As their curiosity grew, I invited them to play with me and help solve each day's new Wordle challenge. I immediately noticed two things. My kindergartener was quick to throw out random letter guesses whereas my second grader was more thoughtful in her selections. I found myself offering them tips as to how they should look at the blank tiles and what logical guesses might be. As I offered hints, I realized my children were learning about words through discovery. Games like Wordle, Hangman, Wheel of Fortune, and Scrabble illustrate how "the ability to spell is rooted in solid knowledge of sound-symbol relationships that is at the core of phonics instruction" (Savage, 2010, p.164) and how the teaching of English orthography merits instructional time in classrooms. In collaborating on this essay, the authors suggest that attention to orthographic patterns is valuable in trying to win the Wordle puzzle but perhaps more importantly calls attention to the ordered nature of English, a language governed by particular letter-sound correspondences.

Hint #1: Frequency of letters matter

When playing a game like Wordle, it is important to make the most of every guess. My kindergartener would offer random letter guesses without realizing the frequency in which some letters appear in the English language. As a young child, she was still learning early concepts about print, including that each letter has a name and makes an associated sound. Guessing *z* would not be as strategic as guessing more popular letters like *s* or *t*, yet she would excitedly shout out "less popular" letter names. Although her learning-to-read curriculum introduced

letters in a specific order because “letters that occur more frequently in print will be learned more quickly due to relative exposure” (Fisher et al., 2023, p 41), she was not aware that guesses like *q*, *u*, or *v* were foolish, especially early in the game. Letters with high frequency, such as *r*, *s*, *t*, *l*, *n*, *e* as seen on Wheel of Fortune, are much more suitable. So, to be a competitive Wordle player, not only is it critical to consider letters which appear frequently, but it is helpful to have an opening guess that uses as many of these letters as possible.

Hint #2: Position matters – initial, medial, or final position changes letter sounds

English, an alphabetic language system, is governed by how letters are associated with sounds. However, English is also a positional language and “letter-sound relationships are governed as much by their environment, or their position in a word, as by simple letter-sound correspondences or phonics rules” (Johnston, 2001, p. 372). Young children beginning to read learn that position matters. When the letter *y* is at the beginning of a word, it is going to make its traditional /y/ or consonant sound. However, when *y* is in final position, it is going to take on the sound of long-e as in *pony*, *city*, *lady* or long-i as in *my*, *cry*, *try*. Sometimes dubbed the Cry Baby rule, the y-principle depends on the number of syllables in the word to determine if it makes its long-e or long-I sound. Another example of positionality concerns *gh*. When these two letters are placed together in initial position, they represent the /g/ sound as in *ghost* and not the /f/ sound when in final position, as in *enough*, *rough*, *tough*. Yet another example of the variability of the *gh* combination is when it is paired with the vowel *i*. The *igh* chunk makes the long-i sound, as in *sight*, *fight*, *high*, *sigh*. Having a good understanding of letter position and how letter sounds can change depending on their placement in a word helps Wordle players make more educated guesses.

Hint #3: Notice patterns

Skilled readers and spellers pay attention to words. They observe usage, spelling patterns, and other word features (Blevins, 2017). Literacy instructors teach the alphabetic principle, which helps young children decode words, but understanding sound-symbol correspondence also helps immensely in encoding, or spelling. Savage (2010) observed that a goal of spelling instruction is “to heighten students’ consciousness of sounds in words and frequently occurring patterns that spell those sounds” (p.163). Early in phonics instruction, young children are introduced to consonant blends, consonant digraphs, and vowel pairs. Knowledge of these language units can help Wordle players make smart guesses. For example, if a player sees that the word ends with the letter *k*, there is a good chance that the adjacent letter could be *c* to complete the /ck/ chunk. However, if *c* is in initial position, it is wise to consider possible blends, such as /cr/ or /cl/. Additionally, recognizing that many words share certain letter combinations, such as the initial consonant blends of /st/, /fl/, /sm/, /pl/, /br/, /spr/, and /str/, can be useful knowledge in solving word puzzles. Since numerous words begin with these two-and three-letter units, knowing about common letter clusters can prove strategic in making the most of each word guess. Understanding certain consonant sequences can render more productive guesses compared to simply naming letters without orthographic association.

Knowing non-sounded consonant pairs is also advantageous. My second-grade daughter was trying to solve a puzzle that had the letter *n* in the second of five letter positions. She used her knowledge of consonant blends and guessed that the *n* may be preceded by the letter *s* for the /sn/ letter pair. When this was incorrect, I reminded her to think of letters that may proceed *n* that still preserve the /n/ sound. Through prior instruction at school, she was able to deduce that the mystery word may begin with *k*, followed by *n*; she was correct. The word was *knock*. When

students understand the use of patterns, they become aware that many words have the same sounds but use different spellings. As an example, the long-a sound can be made using a variety of different spelling patterns: *ay*, *ai* or *a* + *consonant* + *finale-e*. Likewise, long-e can be spelled with double vowels: *ee*, *ea*, or *ie*. Strategic Wordle players draw on their knowledge of letter patterns.

Hint #4: Vocabulary prowess

My older daughter occasionally gets frustrated seeing the speed with which I can solve the daily Wordle. She will spend half an hour piecing together all she knows about language, digraphs, blends, patterns, and silent letters to sometimes run out of guesses and not solve the puzzle at all. When the answer is finally revealed, she will exclaim, “*natal*? Is that even a word? How am I supposed to know that one?” She is correct, for if we do not have a word as part of our speaking vocabulary, how are we to think of it as a possible answer in a word game? Having an expansive vocabulary is “among the strongest predictors of reading comprehension (Baumann et al., 2003, p. 448). Vocabulary knowledge serves as labels for concepts, and adept readers can access a wide repertoire of words (Norton, 2004). In schools, children and young adolescents who learn to look for meaning relationships among words and to observe their common spellings learn two things (Henderson, 1990). First, they learn the various patterns by which roots and affixes are combined; this is where morphological instruction and spelling intersect with vocabulary (Nagy, et al., 2006). Second, they learn to look for these root forms in new word they encounter (Henderson, 1990). The more that is known about a word, “the greater likelihood of spelling the word correctly” (Savage, 2010, p. 169). As instruction in vocabulary positively affects spelling knowledge (Savage, 2010), it is not a stretch to project that individuals with impressive vocabulary knowledge are likely strong Wordle players.

Hint #5: Visual processing

We have all heard someone say, when spelling a troublesome word, “Let me write it and see what looks correct.” Known as visual checking, this check-and-see approach is a helpful tool that aids spellers (Savage, 2010, p. 168). Those who read widely are exposed to hundreds of thousands of words. Each encounter reinforces automatic recognition of the word because all the letters become embedded in the mind and get attached to sound and meaning (Duke, 2022). Accordingly, visual inspection serves an effective strategy for spellers and Wordle players.

Hint #6: Word history

Many of our friends will classify themselves as “pretty good” or “lousy” spellers, with the latter group—almost in the same breath—characterizing English as “an impossible language.” English spelling has “traditionally been considered trial and tribulation to those who teach it and to those who must learn it” (Johnston, 2001, p. 151). Although spelling in the English language is frequently called confusing and considered challenging, knowing phonics generalizations and word histories can clear up a lot of the confusion, especially with irregular or exceptional spellings. An example involves silent letters. Students often find silent letters confusing and may ask, “Why is there a silent *b* in *bomb* and *limb*? Answers to such questions can be found by examining the word’s etymology and derivational history. *Bomb* comes from *bombard* and *limb* from *limber*. In both cases, the /b/ is articulated (Johnston, 2001). Knowing this history elucidates the initial confusion of silent letters. With other words, “some of the curious spellings can be explained because of the complex and convoluted history of three letters: *u*, *v*, and *w*” (Johnston, 2001, p. 155). In Old English, the letter *u* was used for the sounds of *v* and *w* since those letters did not exist (Johnston, 2001). Today we continue to use the letter *u*

to make the /w/ sound in words such as *penguin*. These are just a few of the many surprising aspects of English orthography and its history.

Discussion

Although the English language can be described as complex, it is important to remember that spelling is precise, much like math. We know that $2 + 3 = 5$. Each numerical symbol has a value associated with it that when added produces a total. In spelling, each symbol, or grapheme, has a sound associated with it, and users blend letters together to speak and write words. Spelling, as with math, comes with its associated principles. Once a student understands the spelling system and the generalizations that apply, they advance their orthographic skill. According to Llanes (2018), students who follow the progression of the alphabetic layer, pattern layer, and meaning layer of the spelling system will “build upon their word knowledge, become more informed and flexible with spelling strategies, and make connections between spelling and meaning” (n.p.). Such knowledge equips the user with more fine-tuned language skills and confidence. Instead of seeing words as a peculiar or nonsensical arrangement of letters, learners with knowledge of spelling patterns appreciate the ordered nature of orthography.

To motivate students and engage their linguistic curiosity, teachers may consider bringing Wordle or other such games into the classroom to showcase how orthographic patterns can solve word riddles. A bonus rests with deepening the understanding of spelling structures. Children generally find riddles and puzzles magical. Thus, tapping into this curiosity to make explicit how certain orthographic patterns are more likely to occur than other letter combinations contribute to critical thinking. The authors agree that when they use word games with children, learning and laughter result. Indeed, unexpected discoveries may surface when users explore their growing knowledge of orthographic patterns, especially in game formats.

Final Thoughts

In this article, two avid Wordle players share perspectives about the power of words to bring folks together. They offer helpful hints that might inspire classroom teachers to think more intentionally about pedagogical decisions that highlight the playful nature of language and simultaneously increase students' sophistication with English orthographic structures. Teaching children alphabets and aspects of the English phono-orthographic system need not be tedious. Word games give students a chance to ply their emerging understandings. For the casual or serious Wordle player, the connection between spelling knowledge and application to word guesses can be fun practice. It is not far-fetched to suggest that teachers might use Wordle as part of their language arts pedagogical repertoire. No matter if one merely wants to become a competitive Wordle player or help students think more intentionally about words, the recommendations presented in this article merit consideration.

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