

Learning from interrogating the Real Spelling Tool Box 2, not simply submitting our thinking to it or any reference/resource

Pete Bowers with Deb Plotczik, January 4, 2020

I suspect there are few people more excited than me by the resurrection of the [Real Spelling Tool Box 2](#) in the on-line format with the hard work of Matt Berman. I was first introduced to how my own spelling system works by the first RS Tool Box in 2001. I was Grade 4 teacher in my 9th year as a classroom teacher. As I shared in my [100th WW Newsletter](#) - there simply would be no such thing as structured word inquiry without Real Spelling. The revised and interactive Tool Box 2 about a decade later was an even more comprehensive and rigorous reference on English orthography. But eventually the technology on disks became unreliable and thus was no longer available. I feared that as the community of people working with SWI to understand orthography for their instruction, we had forever lost this priceless resource. Matt's work to make an on-line version that avoided the technical issues is an amazing gift for literacy instruction for years to come.

However, there is one key challenge when working with such an authoritative reference like this. People can be tempted to assume that they can just go to it to "get answers" rather than treating it like we should treat any reference -- something to interrogate in order to construct our understanding. This means that we should read the Tool Box 2 aware that there might be a mistake in understanding, or even just typos in the reference that misdirect.

It is important to realize that the purpose of this resource is to provide a reference as a jumping off point to support the scholarship of those working with it. This means that even people new to this understanding should be encouraged to raise questions about things they see in the Tool Box 2 that they are not sure about - and to do so knowing the flaw may be in the Tool Box, not their understanding.

For these reasons, Matt recently created [THIS](#) new forum on Real Spellers to host discussions about ideas/questions sparked by working with the Tool Box 2. See the first entry in this forum by Gail Venable [HERE](#).

Soon after this forum, I received a wonderful email from Deb Plotczik, who has studied SWI in a number of different contexts and regularly joins my [free weekly SWI Digital Drop In](#) sessions.

I asked Deb if she would write up her account of our email correspondence that I could share with additional commentary. After Deb's story, I'll share other examples to explore including a video about a question I posed Real Spelling back in the first Tool Box days that shows how much Real Spelling seeks challenges to his own thinking!

From Deb...

I received a subscription to the ToolBox2 this Christmas and have already been diving in for an hour or two each day. I have felt like the kid in a candy shop with all of the information. Being trained in OG and phonics for over twenty years before this, I am now attempting to "sift through" my knowledge to filter out what doesn't hold true and keep only conventions and teachings that do. I've been happy to see that I don't need to throw out all that I've learned. But the lens through which I see spelling has definitely been changing.

Because of this filtering/evaluating process, I came across a few things that haven't made sense, so I wrote emails to Pete and Matt. The first was to Pete.

.....Tonight I have been looking through the matrices, and I'm wondering when -s is used and when -es is used. When another syllable is formed or after <y/i>, I "get" that -es is used.

All of the word sums below are from matrices in the Tool Box 2 - the bases have a final non-syllabic <e>. Are the first two mistakes since an -s could be used? If not, what is the reason for -es instead of -s?

nude + *es → nudes
 con + spire + *es → conspires
 bore + s → bores
 pro + fane + s → profanes
 tide + s → tides
 one + s → ones

Pete encouraged my questioning and agreed that <-s> should be used in the first two; he also suggested that I take a look at the <-s/-es> Kit (1B), which I started very soon after. This led to more eye-opening information and another question, which I sent to Matt. A flowchart on page 8 had the same choice to "use the short form <-s>" for both a Yes and No answer (to the decision box - "the plural has formed an extra syllable") (A Yes should lead to "use the long form <-es>"). Matt also encouraged my questioning, agreed that it was a mistake and has fixed it.

Along with spelling conventions and the "truths" that I can hold onto, I am learning other things as well. One delightful discovery is I am in the midst of others who are on a path of learning and discovery. I'm involved in another organization that uses the term "lead learner" for the one who facilitates the class. In his [weekly Monday Drop-Ins](#), Pete is a "lead learner," guiding the discussion but showing enthusiasm for new discoveries along the way.

I am also taking the [Latin for Orthographer's I Spellinar](#) with Real Spelling. In that Spellinar, Real Spelling also models this "lead learner" philosophy by encouraging a leisurely and thoughtful discussion about the topic. His thoughts are not meant to be



- Is there a vowel letter in the second syllable of the spelling <ranchs>?

NO! The spelling *<ranchs> can not stand.

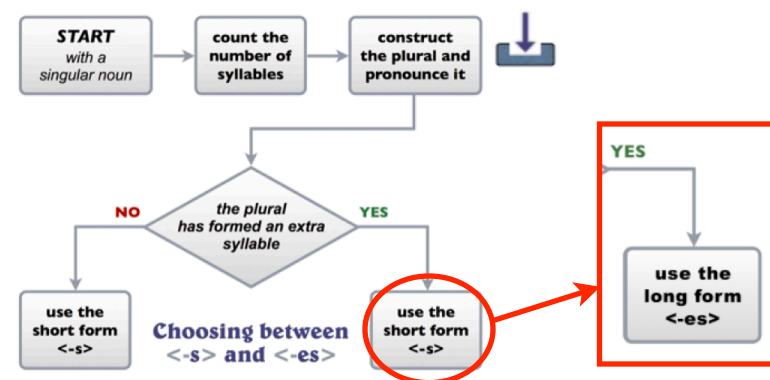
▶ When we know that a spelling is incorrect or not possible we indicate that fact with an initial asterisk.

In order to bring *<ranchs> into conformity with the written syllable convention, we need to write a vowel letter in its second syllable. Using the full form of the suffix <-es> will bring this conformity.

ranch + es → ranches

STUDY TASK: Choosing between the forms of the suffix <-(e)s>

Here is a flow chart that summarizes this process.



Construct the plurals of these nouns, using the flow chart if necessary.

chart nation stagecoach vowel
 marsh kit suffix agreement
 monarch speech crash albatross

Take special note of the plural of < monarch >.

The plural suffix and spellings that have final non-syllabic <e>

The above screen shot from Real Spelling Tool Box 2 Kit 1B as Deb found it. The red circle is added to point to the mistake she found. Clearly this "action box" should from the "YES" arrow should say "use the long form <-es>". In this case, it is clearly just a typo, but such errors can cause confusion, so I'm so glad Deb pointed to it so that Matt could revise it with the correct information shown in the red box now.

the “final word.” Instead, he enthusiastically celebrates when someone asks for clarification or even spots a mistake.

The humility is refreshing; it also encourages those in the Drop-Ins/Spellinars to keep questioning. In a recent Drop-In, [Mary Beth Steven](#) commented on this idea of questioning. I contacted her to hear more about her ideas. She replied...

This idea that we get away from seeing resources as the ultimate authority is an important one. Even as adults, we tend to expect dictionaries to get everything right and if what we think contradicts what the dictionary says, we assume we must be wrong and the dictionary right. One of the things I love about SWI is the scientific thinking that allows us to question any resource as we individually synthesize our understandings. I wrote the following and kept it posted in my classroom. "We are not looking for answers. We are looking to come to an understanding, recognizing that it is temporary, leaving us open to an even richer understanding as further evidence surfaces." And that idea applies not only to us as students, but also to the people who step forward to write the resources we use!

This philosophy of discovering together in humility opens doors to more discovery. Instead of having a “final answer,” we are encouraged to keep on journeying to more treasures of knowledge and understanding. We never “arrive.” The journey is a treasure in and of itself.

I so appreciate Deb for being an active interrogator of resources for her own understanding. Having the confidence to pose a question understanding that even someone as authoritative as Real Spelling will have errors in thinking that need to be investigated is exactly the scholarly approach I hope to facilitate with SWI.

I have noticed other matrices in Real Spelling from time to time where an <-es> was included where it should have been an <-s>. I hope users of the Tool Box keep an eye out for that now that you know there are some orthographic “easter eggs” to find.

In the spirit of Deb’s work, I want to point to a different kind of question that another matrix from the Real Spelling Tool Box 2.

I have used the this matrix on <medi> from the Real Spelling Tool Box for years. It is such a rich family to explore. I even use it in [this video](#) to address the interrelationship of morphology and phonology and to explain the “structure and meaning test”.

However, in more recent workshops and lessons I’ve removed one prefix from this version of the matrix. At some point a friend asked me about the word “remedial” and if it really belonged in this matrix. In my head, I had always assumed there could be a connection between this word and the idea of “middle” but I had never actually tested that hypothesis by confirming the “meaning test” by checking the etymology until being faced with the question. Here’s what I found from Etymonline...

im inter re	medi "between, middle"	ate	es	
			ing	
			ed	
			ion	
al	ly	um	ary	
			a	
			ocre	ity
			eve	al

medial (adj.)

1560s, "pertaining to a mathematical mean," from Late Latin *medialis* "of the middle," from Latin *medius* "in the middle, between; from the middle," as a noun (*medium*) "the middle;"

remedial (adj.)

1650s, "curing, relieving, affording a remedy," from Late Latin *remedialis* "healing, curing," from Latin *remedium* "a cure, remedy, medicine, antidote, that which restores health," from *re-*, intensive prefix (or perhaps literally, "again;" see *re-*), + *mederi* "to heal"

My untested hypothesis was falsified. If <medial> and <remedial> do not share a historical root -- if they are not in the same etymological family -- they simply cannot belong in the same morphological family.

However, I hasten to add, I have not actually proven that the <re-> prefix *cannot* be validly in this matrix. I have only proven that it cannot be in the word “remedial” for the intended meaning of the word in “remedial instruction”. That phrase

uses the word “remedial” from the Latin root “to heal”. It does not have the base <medi> for “middle”.

However, perhaps the <re-> prefix was included in this matrix for a *different* word that I have not been able to think of that *does* use the bound base <medi> for middle. I’d be very curious if any readers can think of what that word might be. until then, I try to use a version of this matrix without the <re-> prefix, but I’m not worried with my old resources that I made before I had that knowledge. Perhaps others will gain the same joy of understanding of thinking about this question!

Finally, I can’t resist sharing an early question I posed Real Spelling back in the old days of the first Real Spelling Tool Box.

I was working on a matrix that had <create> in the banner of a matrix that included words like <creature> and <create>. That part is not invalid, but the problem was, Real Spelling specifically referred to to <create> as “a base” and highlighted the fact that the <ea> was needed instead of the <ee> digraph. The argument was that the <ee> could represent the vowel phoneme in the pronunciation of “creature” but not in “create.”

Do you see the problem with that analysis?

I wrote Real Spelling and explained that given his analysis, I either didn’t understand graphemes, or I didn’t understand morphemes. I could not see how an <ea> digraph could possibly represent *both* the /i:/ phoneme (“long e”) *and* the /eɪ/ phoneme (“long a”) in “create”.

Given that question, I wondered if instead of treating <create> as a free base, what if these words had a bound base <cre> followed by an <-ate> suffix? This would allow both “creature” and “create” to be in the same matrix, and resolve the phonological problem posed by his matrix.

As you will see in [this film](#), Real Spelling could not have been more delighted to be falsified by someone who he had

introduced to orthography only a couple of years earlier. Note the joy he takes in highlighting his own thinking in the screen shot of the video he produced on this topic.

At that time I was at the very beginning of understanding how to draw on etymological structure to guide my morphological analysis. At first I struggled with the fact that I could not find any words with a <cre> base *without* an <-ate> suffix immediately following it. If not for the confusion about

grapheme-phoneme correspondences, there would be nothing wrong with treating <create> as though it was a base, even if in reality it was a “basal construction.” But when I saw the Latin root *create* “to make, bring forth, produce, procreate, beget, cause,” in Etymonline, I recognized the Latin structure that I now try to remember to represent with parentheses like this: *cre(are)*. I could see that the Latin stem was *cre-*. That etymology, and the phonological issue made me confident in the new analysis even without identifying an English word with a <cre> base and no <-ate> suffix. It took me years to finally discover such word -- but I finally did. In fact I think there are a few. The irony is that all I had to do was search the Latin root *create* in the search Engine of Etymonline to find an example of such a word in English. See if you can find it!

Many thanks to Deb for sparking this commentary on the scholarship the RS Tool Box 2 can provide.

I hope readers use this [new forum on Real Spellers](#) to share thoughts on this post and other discoveries while working the Real Spelling Tool Box 2. This amazing resource was created by a deep scholar. That means it is both extremely rich *and* gloriously fallible. Both characteristics are to be celebrated - and Deb has done just that for us.

