## A message on Facebook from a parent new to SWI about her 16 year-old son

I recently saw the following message posted on one of the SWI Facebook groups. It is a powerful window into the effect of SWI with older learners. There are so many questions/concerns about SWI with young children, that the importance of this work with older kids can get lost in the shuffle. The refrain, "Why didn't someone explain this to me before?" is especially familiar to those working with SWI with struggling older students.

With the author's permission, I am delighted to share this eloquent description of the experience she and her son had when they encountered SWI.

*Karen's Facebook Post…*

So excited to hear from my son (16) that he sees how logical spelling is now. He says "it just makes sense, and I can figure it out now that I know what to look for." This is the "severely dyslexic" kid that was reading at a 2nd grade level a year ago and "failed" with almost every other reading and spelling program. By May of last year, using a synthetic phonics approach he had improved to a 5th grade level, but stalled out again. His tutor at that time repeatedly told him there was no rhyme nor reason to spelling, you just write down a possible grapheme for the sounds you hear and then we'll give you the correct ones if you don't get it right the first time. And she said in time, once he'd read enough and understood the code well enough he would start to see the patterns. I was writing her an

> *"It just makes sense, and I can figure it out now that I know what to look for."*
>
> 16 year-old dyslexic after introduction to SWI

email tonight to tell her about SWI and that is when he made the comment above. [highlighted in centre text box]

This school year we had really tried to focus on his spelling and it wasn't working. The end of January I came across Pete's work and I dove in head first. My son thought I was crazy for being so excited about what I was learning and doubted that it would help. So far all I've done with him is introduce him to word sums, some basic matrices, the replace the <e> convention, the doubling consonants in monosyllables words and done a few brief word studies. But he is getting it!!!

This week we did a brief word study on "navigation" since he had misspelled it in his writing. He really just wanted me to tell him how to correct it, but I knew I'd corrected it before and it had never stuck so we were going to do the word study.

His 1st hypothesis was: < nava + gate/ + ion >.

I was trying to get him to discover to use <i> instead of <a> and in our discussion I asked if he thought "navy" was related he said yes and changed his hypothesis to:

< navy/i +gate/ + ion.>

He said I'm not sure why, but I think the <y> can be made an <i>. I told him he was right on track and that we just haven't learned that convention yet. I knew he was still off so I guided him to Etymonline to look at it. That's when we discovered that it should be < navig + ate/ + ion >.

It really only took a few minutes and he seemed semi-intrigued with the study. The next day he used the word "navigate" in his written narration of "Carry on, Mr. Bowditch" and this time he

got it right and didn't really hesitate in doing so. We've been reading this book for some time and the word has come up often and it has always been misspelled and corrected. The change is that now he believes he can figure out how to spell words and he saw that it really was just the <i> that he was getting hung up on.

I can't wait to see how much this is going to impact his education!

When I asked Karen for permission to share this story, she was happy for me to do so, as long as I also shared some caveats. She wisely wanted readers to understand that they are still early in this work and she's not drawing hard conclusions yet. Before I share her excellent follow-up message, I wanted to share some observations on the first one.

**Nothing motivates like understanding**

Could one hope for a more positive effect on this16-year-old's *motivation* for studying the written word? It's great that the learning his mom offered him resulted in him remembering how to spell the word "navigation," but that is hardly what grabs your attention in this story.

This student has worked hard for years to get better at spelling, but whatever he tried never made sense. We see the sense of helplessness that experience has created when his mom writes, "My son thought I was crazy for being so excited about what I was learning and doubted that it would help."

Like a million times before, he hits a word he needs to write for school, but he can't remember how to spell it despite multiple attempts. But this time, his mom sees a chance to show her son *why* she's been excited about

what she has been learning. They used word sums to work out the morphological spelling-meaning structure of this and related words, and sought help in that process by referencing etymology. And then — guided by attention to the written structures and their meaningful connections — there was something new about this spelling.

Now it made sense.

And once he understood, he did not have to memorize. Surely *understanding* a spelling is the best way to make it easy to remember. Contrast the helplessness of his first statement to what he says after this first introduction to studying the interrelation of morphology, etymology and phonology with his mom's help, *"It just makes sense, and I can figure it out now that I know what to look for."*

That clear shift in motivation and first sense of being able to have some control over understanding spelling is enormous. The fact that he remembered how to spell "navigation" isn't the key point. But it does provide him and his mom with evidence of the possibility of success at remembering spellings with this new way of studying. That success fuels newfound motivation for studying in this way. A virtuous cycle for studying and understanding spelling has begun that has never been offered before.

Accurate spellers can't usually *explain* why a word is spelled the way it is, they just remember somehow. That clearly does not happen as much for those of us with histories as terrible spellers. We try multiple ways to "spell the sounds" of words, but can't remember *which* grapheme is needed for a word when many are possible. Since we don't just "remember" we need a reference point beyond "possible grapheme-phoneme

correspondences." Learning how to interrogate the influence of morphology and etymology on grapheme choice is the game changer.

A fascinating part of this story is that the hypothesis of this structure < navy/i + gate/ + ion > turned out not to stand up. It was a way of thinking about the <i> where his previous misspelling used an <a>. But the hypothesis they landed on, < navig + ate/ + ion >, doesn't provide as clear an explanation of the need for the < i >. In the end, however, that didn't matter in terms of fixing the attested spelling for this word in the mind of this dyslexic learner. It is not necessary that we understand every detail of the spellings we investigate for the act of actively engaging in the spelling, meaning and pronunciation of words to help us remember the spelling and meanings of the words we encounter.

In fact, Etymonline offers good reason to propose a deeper analyses.

## navigate (v.)

1580s, "move from place to place in a ship, sail" (intrans.), a back-formation from **navigation**, or else from Latin *navigatus*, past-participle of *navigare* "to sail, sail over, go by sea, steer a ship," from *navis* "ship" (from PIE root **\*nau-** "boat") + root of *agere* "to set in motion, drive, drive forward"

Perhaps that second root *ag(ere)* for "to set in motion, drive, drive forward" is giving us evidence of an <ig> or <ige> base! But this hypothesis raises other questions.

Anyone curious about that path of inquiry would do well to study the entry on this word in Gail Venable's brilliant book "Backpocket Words." While the analysis by Karen and her son may not be the deepest possible analysis, it is a *valid* analysis. It may that <navig> is actually a combination of two bases, but this analysis does not violate the structure of a morpheme.

Note that it was not *required* to get to the deepest analysis for this student to remember the spelling of this word that previously was so problematic and frustrating. More importantly, that deeper analysis was not required for this 16-year-old to have what seems to be his first ever experience feeling like he can *understand* spelling now that he "knows what to look for."

Why did this work for the spelling of "navigate"?

Some people build strong mental representations for the spellings of words without much effort. One thing that those of us that don't remember spellings easily need is to pay close attention to the orthography - and that requires motivation to look closely. Dyslexics do not have deficits in critical thinking and making connections. The clarity and understanding from studying morphological structure with word sums and matrices provokes that needed closer attention. When someone thinks it's hopeless, it's hard to motivate the needed attention. Karen signals the key change in motivation to look when she writes, "The change is that now he believes he can figure out how to spell words."

Motivation is necessary, but not sufficient, however. This attention to the links between spelling structure, meaning and pronunciation provides a meaningful context in which to study the abstract grapheme-phoneme correspondences that otherwise seem random. Both the < a > and the < i > are available to represent the phoneme in "navigation" this student was trying to spell. But once the < i > is part of what has been studied

closely, and it has been linked in his mind as perhaps part of a < y > / < i > pattern, it didn't even matter that this does not seem to be part the story. The abstract correspondences have now fixed with the support of a meaningful learning experience.

Meaning and structure have great power to help us remember abstract grapheme-phoneme correspondences - I experience this over and over again. For example, some time ago I was trying to write the word "exorbitant" in an email. But my misspelling *<exhorbidant> didn't even prompt my computer to find the correct spelling. I was curious and looked it up. The second I saw the actual spelling, I knew I'd never forget how to spell it.

I had confused this word with words with similar pronunciations at the beginning like "exhibit" or "exhortation." In my pronunciation the < t > of "exorbitant" is pronounced like a /d/ (It is actually a 'flap' [ɾ]). But the moment I saw the actual spelling of this word, the <orbit> jumped out at me and I knew I'd never wonder about this spelling again. It couldn't have an <h> because the prefix is <ex->. After seeing <orbit> I could see that something that is "exorbitant" has a price that is "out of this world." Once I understood the structure and meaning of this word, and linked the pronunciation of the < t > in "orbit" to "exorbitant," I knew I would always remember this spelling. Once my mind *understands* a spelling, it remembers. I don't need to memorize what I understand.

Gail Venable has kindly let me share THIS LINK to the entry on "Exhort & Exorbitant" in her book. I highly recommend you explore not only to learn more about what these words to tell us about how English spelling works, but a sense of the richness of Gail's book. I can't recommend it highly enough.

These ideas of the motivation for studying orthography in reading and writing that results from *understanding,* and the value of using spelling-meaning connections to understand grapheme-phoneme correspondences are addressed in the pre-print of my most recent (in press) article (Bowers, 2022).

Now consider the follow-up message from Karen when I asked if I could share this story…

Pete,

Thanks for your kind remarks. I have had to think on this a bit. There is still a bit of me that is hesitant, because we have seen early big jumps in his reading progress with other programs, that eventually leave us stalled 6 months later. And, initially, I have found those programs amazingly helpful in the moment. At 10 he went from being a non-reader to 2nd grade in 1 week and with the assurance from the program he was on his way. And then last year we went from 2nd grade to 5th grade in 12 weeks with the assurance from the program that he was well on his way. Both of those programs also wanted to use his story, and I allowed them to because it was such an improvement from where we were at and in the short term it seemed it had provided what was needed to get him on his way. However, I'm not sure I could recommend either program now.

So maybe you can understand while I'm optimistic with SWI, but I'm also a bit guarded as to the long term results. So I am okay with you sharing the story, if there is also the caveat that we have no evidence, at this point, that this will indeed lead to the desired results of grade-level reading and spelling.

If you do write an article, I have a couple of thoughts to add to my original post. When I first came to SWI, I really just wanted to know a list of the conventions to be able to teach. I really thought I just needed to hand over the big suffix checker for him to utilize. However, because I was short on prep time, I just gave him, and the other boy I tutor, the worksheet were they have to come up with the hypothesis and then the next week I had them build that portion of the flow chart. When he did Activity #4 [in my book [Teaching How the Written Word Works](#)] his hypothesis was that you doubled when the suffix began with <e> or <i> (he also had noted the other 2 reasons accurately). So when I had him make the flow chart, I gave him some sample word sums that had other vowel suffixes that caused the doubling, as well as examples with <x> and <w> in the base. Afterward I asked him if he could see why while his hypothesis wasn't wrong, it also wasn't complete.

He responded, "If I'd had those same words, I could have made a better hypothesis, but with the words provided I couldn't have proved anything besides the <e> or <i>."

After this I could see the beauty of proving/disproving an hypothesis and creating the flow chart himself. If I'd just given him the flow chart and a list of word sums to complete he would never have had to think this deeply on it.

Also, I believe based on his past behavior, if I had given him the flow chart initially,  he would have just relied on it and been slower to internalize the concept. As it is now, he hasn't really had to use the flow chart at all because he just sees the patterns and knows what to do.

Looking forward to future conversations and learning.

Karen

## After-word

I couldn't be more impressed with Karen's cautious skepticism/optimism with SWI and the way she is helping her son so early in this journey.

Notice her observations about the need for 'deep processing'.

"If I'd just given him the flow chart and a list of word sums to complete he would never have had to think this deeply on it."

"[I]f I had given him the flow chart initially,  he would have just relied on it and been slower to internalize the concept."

That deep processing helps create the mental representations of the spelling, meaning and pronunciations of words that all reading theories I know of argue is needed for effectively learning to read and write with automaticity. (This includes Ehri's (2014) orthographic mapping and Perfetti's (2007) lexical quality hypothesis.) Dyslexics may have weaker phonological processing skills and other issues that hinder literacy learning, but they do not have a deficit in critical thinking and problem-solving or seeing interesting connections others often miss.

This aspect of SWI is central to why I argue that SWI fits so well with recommendations of "cognitive load theory". If that topic interests (See more on that at [this page](#).)

Many thanks to Karen and her son for shining a light on learning through SWI with older children!

Pete Bowers, May 2, 2022