English is filled with foreign words, multiple ways to spell the same sound, and general weirdness. We do very well, considering, says RD chief subeditor Donyale Harrison.

**Why Can’t We Spell**

People in my line of work are meant to be pedantic about spelling, but I can’t do it. English is so filled with ridiculous ways to spell words that it’s really a wonder any of us can spell anything at all. Consider that we *read* a book, or have it *read* to us, but we *lead* a horse, or have it *led* to us. Most of us say *dis-sa-pear*, but it’s spelt *dis-ap-pear*; same for the words we often hear as *sep-er-ate* and *def-in-ate-ly*, but which are spelled *separate* and *definitely*. Basically

For correct spellings in illustration, see page 96
and *publicly* sound as though they should have the same endings, but don’t, while *clever, kind* and *quite* start with three different letters, but the same consonant sound.

**Stealing Loquacity**

There are three reasons for all the complexity. The first is that English is a hodgepodge language: some words have been imposed upon us by sundry invaders (Romans, Vikings, Normans, and, socially, Americans); others begged, borrowed or stolen as required.

It’s not that there aren’t rules, it’s just that there are rules that apply only to the Latinate words, or the Germanic words, or French words... Actually, for a lot of Old English words, it is that there’s not much in the way of rules – they were spelled however seemed right and no-one argued the point because most people couldn’t read and those who could all had swords.

But while we, for example, might think that a good general rule is “add an S to make a plural”, a lot of Greek and Latin words change their ends for plurals instead: *bacterium* becomes *bacteria, medium/media, basis/bases, stimulus/stimuli*.

Many Germanic words that came into English early on use vowel shifts to make their plurals: *man* becomes *men, mouse* becomes *mice, goose* becomes *geese*. *Moose*, on the other hand, is an Algonquin word from the New World, so it doesn’t become *meese*.

English-French words tend to have plurals and, indeed, general spellings that have been made more “English”, but only recently. Peers of Jane Austen would be forgiven for writing “she felt a strong *connexion* with the owner of so many *chateaux*” rather than *connection* and *chateaus*.

In fact, most “odd” letter combinations in English often come directly from the root languages. If you know that *manoeuvre* comes from the French, it’s easier to guess how it’s spelled, because you’re more likely to think of combinations like *ma(i)n* (hand) plus *oeuvre* (work).

Similarly, those tricky -ible endings go with most Latin words, while -able endings go with almost all others. The word *diarrhoea* seems unnecessarily cruel in English, but is spelled in a way that would make perfect sense to an ancient Greek.

It’s still happening. Recent loan words like *furore* have the same problems as older ones. In many traditional parts of the Anglosphere, it’s pronounced fu-roar-re, which is close to the original Italian and a good clue to spelling it. Speakers in other parts of the world say something closer to ‘few-roar’, but only the Americans drop the final E to spell it furor.

While making it hard to spell, this kleptomania has at least made English easy to learn: most speakers of other
languages can find a few words and rules they already know.

**Never Letting Go**
The second reason is English’s unwillingness to ever let go of a spelling once we’ve got it right. Just look at the Germanic plurals – *children*, *teeth*, *oxen* – that were popular enough to survive intact through centuries of language reforms under Viking and then Norman invasions.

But it also appears in words like *knight*, which was once pronounced *k’nich-t*. Back then, what looks like a ridiculously complicated way to spell the word we say *nite* was a genuine guide to pronunciation.

*Food*, *good* and *blood* all have different vowel sounds to modern ears, but for centuries they rhymed. A process called the Great Vowel Shift was responsible for this change, and it’s the reason we could probably understand Shakespeare as read in the 16th century without much effort, but not Chaucer as read in the 14th. A great many words with similar spellings once also sounded the same, even though their sounds have since changed, which is why *love* and *prove* are frequently rhymed in Elizabethan plays and poetry, but now just confuse people learning to spell them.

**Out to Trick You**
And then there’s the final reason spelling is hard: a lot of the “rules” are more in the way of guidelines. Even the -ible, -able distinction mentioned earlier has a number of exceptions like *dependable*.

Some “rules” are really just big fibs, like “I before E except after C”. *Weird*, *eight*, *beige*, *foreign*, *seize*, *leisure*, *deity*, *their*, *ancient*, *glacier*, *science*, *society* and *species* are just 13 of the many words that put lie to that one.

And as if all this wasn’t enough, there are two major competing “brands” of English on the market, British and American. Both have their pluses: the US-style of using the one *practice* for all occasions is perfectly sensible, as is *center* over *centre* (though why they ditch French spelling and then say ‘erb for herb is beyond me). Losing all those extra U’s and -me endings must save a lot of paper over the course of a year.

But UK *leukaemia* gives you a better guide to pronunciation than US *leukemia* and the US *maneuver* is still hard to spell while losing all the French clues for manoeuvre. And while the argument for standardising *offense* and *defense* to go with -se endings like *sense* looks as though it’s reasonable, they still write *fence*. 
So What to Do?
In many ways, we are more literate these days than we have ever been. Sure a search for *definitely* gets 7.6 million Google hits, but the top ten are all saying “it’s DEFINITELY!” With spellcheck and dictionaries more readily available than ever before, do we still need to learn to spell?

Yes and no. Mistakes aren’t indicative of intelligence: geniuses can be dyslexic, even Shakespeare was rubbish at spelling. And a lot of errors are down to inattention or poor typing.

Informally, in notes, text messages and personal blogs, it matters little as long as it doesn’t create confusion: “I fel out of the bote” is perfectly clear, but “I hid to go to cawt” is much less so. Standardised spelling’s greatest strength is that it brings clarity.

The thing that accurate spelling does show is diligence. If you’re willing to take the time to learn *liaise* and not *liase* and the difference between *compliment* and *complement*, then you’re someone who cares about details and who will take time to check them. And if you’re writing a job application, or a formal letter, or an article on spelling, then that matters a great deal.

Good spelling also reassures us when it comes from an “authority”: a book or magazine, the government or a company prospectus. If they have taken the time and effort to spell well, then we believe they’ve also checked their other facts and figures. Bad spelling in the same contexts makes us suspicious.

But even there, I still think no-one should be expected to spell *diarrhoea* correctly on the first go.

“*How to Spell*” will appear in our January edition, with helpful tips for at least a few common difficulties.

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GETTING IT RIGHT

The wrong words on page 93 are among those most commonly misspelled, thanks to the fact that the wrong spelling still looks or sounds right. The correct version of each pair appears below.

- accommodate ✔ licence
- cemetery ✔ necessarily
- definitely ✔ occasion
- friend ✔ recommend
- independent ✔ separate
- irresistible ✔ weird

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TAKING ALL THE FUN OUT OF IT

“Frictional coefficient under banana skin.”

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