The Five Developmental Stages of Spelling

Stage I - Preliterate

Before children can read, write, or spell, they must first acquire some fundamental understandings about language. This process occurs during the preliterate stage. As children experience the printed page, both as a result of watching books being read and of exploring books on their own, they develop concepts of print. For example, they become aware that English words are written from left to right and flow from the top to the bottom of the page. Beginning writing experiences might include “pretend writing” with scribbles or random marks that eventually become more linear. Children then learn to write actual letters, often beginning with their own names, showing words as strings of letters or letter-like symbols. These activities lay the foundation for the language skills that are developed in the next stage.

Stage II: Phonetic

The second developmental stage is auditory. As children are increasingly exposed to language, they develop phonemic awareness—the ability to distinguish the individual sounds that make up spoken words in English. They then relate these sounds to print by understanding that letters represent sounds, letters make up words, and that each word looks different.

In the phonetic stage, most instruction involves helping children match individual sounds in words to their corresponding letters, usually starting with their own names. They often use all capital letters and spell words incorrectly. For example, they may spell KAT for cat, MI for my, LUV for love, and U for you. Silent letters in words like bake or lamb may be omitted. Instructors welcome these spellings as an indication that the student is beginning to understand sound-to-letter correspondence. Children arrive at the end of the phonetic stage once they have learned the basic rules of phonics and can actively apply them to both reading and spelling.

Stage III: Skill Development

This third developmental stage is the most difficult, the most critical, and the longest for emerging spellers. It usually begins by the end of first grade, once children have cracked the basic phonetic code and are progressing rapidly in reading. As students learn the phonics rules needed to develop reading skill, they are able to apply these rules to their spelling. Problems often arise, however, when children become aware of words that are not spelled phonetically, such as house, there, and said. Phonics rules need to be de-emphasized at this stage because they are no longer needed to help the student learn to read. In fact, over-teaching phonics at this stage can actually create unnecessary confusion in spelling.

The overriding neurological principle is that, because of the numerous inconsistencies in our language, new and different spellings must be connected to context in order for the new information to be linked correctly and permanently to long-term memory. As students encounter new vocabulary over several
grade levels, spelling skill increases as they apply consistent strategies to master more complex spelling patterns and a greater number of irregularly-spelled words.

The critical thing to remember is that this is a stage—a developmental link to the stages that follow. Children are often in the skill-development stage through the late elementary years. It may seem repetitious to practice the same skills over and over again, year after year; however, if students do not master these skills, it is very difficult for them to move ahead in spelling development.

Stage IV: Word Extension

A much more complicated stage—the word-extension stage—focuses on syllables within words, as well as prefixes and suffixes. In the upper elementary or intermediate grades, children often struggle with issues such as doubling consonants when changing the endings (pot/potting, but look/looking) and dropping the final e before adding an ending (love/loving, but excite/excitement). Other issues arise with words such as almost. Why isn’t it spelled allmost? Often the brightest children become the most confused or exasperated by these inconsistencies, but they eventually learn to master them as they move through this stage of development.

Stage V: Derivational Constancy

This final stage explores related words—those with the same derivation or origin—that usually have a consistent pattern despite changes in pronunciation. These words are often predictable if a student is familiar with word roots. Greek and Latin root study is helpful at this stage as mature spellers gain an understanding of how patterns and meaning are related. Students gain the most benefit from this stage if they begin derivational studies after basic vocabulary has been learned and a strong foundation has been built in the previous stages.