

The write stuff

by Sally Blundell / 19 February, 2005

Do we have a spelling crisis and, if so, does it matter?

First, there are the natural-born spellers, picking up the right letter combinations through a strange and enviable process of osmosis as they learn to read and write. Then there are those who remain permanently mystified by the seeming illogical patterning of letters, while the rest of us work in a boggy world of double or single consonants, "e"s where there should be "a"s and stuttering suffixes.

This last group appears to be growing. Since the 1950s, various reports have claimed that New Zealand could do better at spelling. School principals have long complained about the literacy standards in beginning teachers. Tertiary institutions have had to contend with woeful spelling in first-year to postgraduate student work. A recent study by Canterbury University found a large number of students struggling with spelling, grammar and basic sentence structure.

Do we have a spelling crisis?

"Things have been getting worse and worse," says Drake Personnel's Maurice O'Brien. "We're seeing CVs with bad grammar, capitals in weird places, "I"s not capitalised, no apostrophes, spelling all over the place. And people are relying more and more on spellcheck."

And we all know what that means – spelling mistakes become word mistakes as we sit at our key bored and try to right. And even if our software does pick up a misspelling just press "Add" and hey! You were right all along.

In a small closet of an office at the University of Canterbury, Tony Deverson, co-editor of The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary, is not perturbed.

"People used to complain, people are still complaining, people will always complain. There's always been a range of competencies in spelling."

With universities increasing their intake - in the 1980s about 5-10% of school leavers went on to university, now that number is closer to 40% - it is only logical that they are finding a wider range of language skills.

But without any long-term national indicators of children's writing, spelling standards remain largely anecdotal.

"We have no research to prove that there is more of a problem than before," says Fay Parkhill from the Christchurch College of Education. "But I don't think we have been as great at teaching writing as we have been at teaching reading. We thought we were so good at reading that we couldn't be bad at writing. But it just doesn't follow."

Indeed it doesn't. Since 1995, Otago University's National Education Monitoring Project has been surveying educational achievement at Year 4 and Year 8 levels. The latest writing results show little change between 1998 and 2002 and "considerable scope for improvement in editing, punctuation, spelling and grammatical correctness."

Overall, says co-director Dr Terry Crooks, standards have slipped markedly, with colloquialisms and deliberate misspellings stewing the language in the wake of advertising, texting and the diminishing use of handwriting.

"Schools have an uphill battle. We keep adding subjects – technology, dance, drama – and new elements of existing subjects."

Does our education system value spelling?

Source: <http://www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2005/the-write-stuff/>

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LITERACY TASK

You may write your response to this task in te reo Māori or English

1. READING AND WRITING

What am I being asked to do?

Read the article provided

Write two paragraphs in response. For paragraph 1 use the article you have been given and write a summary of the key points. For paragraph 2 write your opinion in relation to this topic.

How long will my piece of writing be?

We are expecting one to one and a half pages of your writing.

Your words

Write in your words. DO NOT COPY groups of words or sentences from the article.

Style of writing

This should be formal writing, not conversational style.