

GRADING OF WORDS

Macquarie has been involved in spelling competitions for over a decade and our system of grading words into levels of difficulty was established after much consultation with education academics, teachers and assessment experts. In grading the words we take into account multiple factors, including the following:

- schwas – neutral vowels
- atypical pronunciations
- ambiguous pronunciations
- silent letters
- homophones
- double consonants
- spelling rules applied
- extra phonemes in pronunciation
- number of syllables
- abnormal clusters of multiple consonants
- frequency / familiarity within age group

This grading system is objective and results in words grouped with words of similar difficulty. Of course, individual differences always come into play – a child with an Italian background is probably going to find words like **spaghetti** and **bruschetta** less challenging than would a child with a Vietnamese background, for example. Children of different religious backgrounds are familiar with different sets of words relating to their faith. Different interests and talents expose children to different vocabulary areas. There is nothing that can be done about this, and, over the course of a competition, things tend to even out. It is understood that competitions are based on the progressive increase of difficulty, and we have found it of little or no use to announce to the competitors and audience when the difficulty level is being raised.

The level of difficulty reached at the final stages of competition depends on the talent of the spellers. At a state or national level we would expect the spellers to be very skilled, so the words could get to a very high difficulty level and will be of lower frequency. Some of these words will not be familiar to all the competitors. The successful spellers will either know the word because they read widely, or will not know the word but will be able to use their knowledge of spelling rules, etymology, similar words, etc., to work out the most likely spelling.