

Spelling Tips 7 – Borrowings from other languages

It is precisely because some words are un-English that they cause difficulties in English spelling. The English language has gathered words from far and wide, displaying a striking ability to expand its vocabulary by absorbing foreign words. In the process, these words are often changed to some extent to suit an English pronunciation, but we seem to favour leaving at least some trace of their foreign origin in the spelling.

Thus we have words from Chinese, like *kowtow* and *lychee*; from Japanese, like *judo* and *origami*; from French, like *chic* and *cul-de-sac*, from German, like *glockenspiel* and *pretzel*; and from Italian, like *espresso* and *spaghetti*. Each of these has a feature of the original borrowing in the spelling.

These are probably the most entertaining words to learn to spell because they take us on a trip around the world in the process of becoming familiar with them. But there is one other important set of words for us as Australians and that is the words we have taken from Aboriginal languages. These are largely flora and fauna -- *barramundi*, *budgerigar* and *koala*; *coolibah*, *jarrah* and *mallee*. But there are other items as well -- *billabong*, *corroboree*, *dillybag*, *humpy* and *gibber*, for example. The first words were borrowed from the Dharug language spoken around Sydney Cove, but after that settlers in many different parts of the country added words from a great range of Aboriginal languages.

Here are some more words that we have borrowed from around the world.

berserk

The first syllable of **berserk** is spelt *ber* though you do not hear the *r*. It is spelt like this because *ber* comes from an Icelandic word meaning 'bear-like'. A *berserker* was a Norse warrior of great courage and strength who fought with frenzied fury in battle.

dachshund

It will be easier to spell **dachshund** if you think about the two German words of which it is made up -- *dachs* meaning 'a badger' and *hund* meaning 'a dog'. So a **dachshund** was originally a dog (or hound -- remember the *h*) used for hunting badgers.

eisteddfod

The word **eisteddfod** comes from a Welsh word (meaning 'session') and the spelling contains combinations of letters that are common in Welsh but unusual in English. The main spelling points to remember are that the sound at the beginning is spelt *ei* though it is pronounced 'uh', there is a double *d* in the middle, and the last syllable is *fod* although it sounds like 'fuhd'.

entrepreneur

Entrepreneur comes from a French word (meaning 'undertake') which is why the 'o' sound at the beginning is spelt *e*. Then there are another three *e*'s, spelling the two 'uh' sounds in the middle and finally as part of the *-eur* ending. This ending occurs in several words that have come from French and means 'someone who does something', as in *amateur* and *chauffeur*.

genealogy

The word **genealogy** comes from the same Greek word as *gene* does. If you think of *gene* this will help you to remember that the vowel sound after the *n* is spelt *e* (though it may sound like it should be spelt *i*). The suffix *-logy* is used in many words relating to the study of something. Remember that in this word it has an *a* before it.

ghetto

Note the double *t* before the *o* ending in **ghetto**. This occurs in many words which come from Italian, such as *stiletto* and *risotto*. **Ghetto** comes from the Italian name given to the Jewish quarter of Venice in the 16th century.

hippopotamus

The word **hippopotamus** comes from the Greek words *hippos* meaning 'horse' and *potamos* meaning 'river', in other words 'horse of the river'.

impromptu

Remember that the ending of **impromptu** is spelt with a *u* which is quite unusual in English. This is because it comes from the Latin phrase *in promptu*, meaning 'in readiness'.

karaoke

The word **karaoke** comes from two Japanese words -- *kara* meaning 'absent' and *oke* meaning 'orchestra'.

picturesque

The basic meaning of **picturesque** is 'like a picture'. You know the spelling of *picture*, so all you need to remember is the *-esque* suffix (meaning 'like' or 'in the style of') in place of the final *e*. This suffix gives an 'esk' sound because it comes from French. Another word with this ending is *grotesque*.

cassette

Remember that the final syllable of **cassette** is spelt *ette* (although it sounds like 'et'). This suffix comes from French and means 'small' or 'feminine'. **Cassette** originally meant 'little box'. Other words with this ending include *serviette*, *flannelette* and *cigarette*.

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