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Sound First: The Free Family Guide to Spelling That Sticks

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Chapter 1: The Lie of the List: Why Traditional Spelling Fails

By Thursday night, the scene is familiar.

The spelling list is smudged from being dragged in and out of backpacks all week. The words are lined up in a neat column as if neatness could do the learning for us: fifteen little strangers that showed up on Monday, demanded attention all week, and will vanish after Friday's test like they were never invited in the first place.

Your child sits at the kitchen table, pencil hovering, shoulders tight. You say, "Let's practice." They say, "I did." You point to the list. They point to the page in their notebook where they copied each word three times in a row. The evidence is there, black and white. The learning is not.

And then comes the part that makes good parents feel like bad parents. You start doing the things you were taught to do: quiz them, cover the words, make them "try harder," send them back to copy it again, add a sentence for each word, take away screen time, offer a reward, threaten a consequence, wonder if something is wrong.

Nothing is wrong with your child.

Something is wrong with the model.

The weekly spelling list, practiced by copying, is the oldest kind of school habit: it looks like work, it produces paper, and it gives adults something we can count. Ten correct. Twelve correct. Fifteen correct. We get a score, and a score feels like a measurement. But spelling is not a sport where you can peak on Friday and be finished. Spelling is a long-term memory skill, and long-term memory is not impressed by one-week performances.

Here is the quiet truth: most kids can be trained to pass a Friday spelling test without becoming better spellers.

They can memorize a list the way you might memorize a grocery run: eggs, milk, bread. You can remember it long enough to get through the store, and then it dissolves. That is not failure. That is exactly how short-term memory behaves when we do not give it a system to attach to.

A weekly list often turns spelling into a guessing game with prizes. Some children guess well. Some children guess poorly. The ones who guess well get praised for being "good at spelling," and the ones who guess poorly

get labeled, quietly or out loud, as careless, lazy, or not readers. The truth is much less personal and much more hopeful: both groups are responding to the same weak instruction.

The list itself is usually the first problem. Words are often chosen because they match a theme (farm words, weather words, holiday words) or because they appear in a story the class is reading. That makes sense for vocabulary. It does not make sense for spelling.

Spelling is the act of storing words in the brain so they can be pulled out quickly and accurately. The brain does not store words as whole pictures, like photographs. It stores them as a map between sounds and letters, anchored by meaning. A strong spelling lesson is not “Here are fifteen words.” A strong spelling lesson is “Here is the pattern that shows up in hundreds of words, and here is how to hear it, build it, and write it.”

When words are selected because they fit a topic instead of a pattern, the child is forced to learn fifteen separate facts. Fifteen separate burdens. The list might contain shine, bright, night, light, and high. Those could be taught as a powerful little family (the long I sound spelled igh and ight). Or the list might mix those with cloud, rain, storm, and umbrella because the theme is “weather.” Now there is no system. Just a pile.

That pile is where copywork usually steps in.

Copying looks like practice, but most of the time it is not spelling practice. It is handwriting practice with occasional visual matching. When a child copies a word that is right in front of them, they can complete the task without ever fully processing the sound structure of the word. Their eyes follow. Their hand repeats. The brain stays oddly uninvolved.

You can test this in a gentle way. Ask your child to copy the word because three times. Then cover the word and ask them to write it again. Many children, even bright ones, will pause. Some will write becuase. Some will write becase. Some will stare at the paper like the letters fell out of their mind the moment the model disappeared.

That is not because they “weren’t paying attention.” They were paying attention to the wrong thing.

Copywork trains the child to rely on the visible word. Spelling requires the child to rely on the invisible word: the word as a sequence of sounds, held in working memory, then matched to spelling choices. If you never require that match, you never build the habit.

This is why the usual home routine becomes so exhausting. You are

trying to force the brain into long-term storage without giving it the tools that trigger storage in the first place.

Parents often notice a maddening pattern: the child can spell the word correctly at night, and then miss it the next day. Or they can spell it correctly in isolation on the practice sheet, and then miss it inside a writing assignment. Or they can spell it correctly when you say, “It’s on the list,” but miss it when the teacher uses it in a sentence.

Those are not random mistakes. They are a perfect description of a word that has not been mapped.

A memorized word is fragile. It depends on the exact conditions under which it was memorized: the look of the list, the rhythm of chanting, the order of the words, the fact that you’re sitting at the table with a pencil. Change the conditions, and the memory evaporates.

A mapped word is sturdy. It can be spelled in a sentence, in a story, on a whiteboard, in the car with finger-writing, weeks later, months later. It is not being held up by a temporary trick. It has a home in the brain.

Traditional spelling instruction often accidentally rewards fragile learning. Here is how it happens.

On Monday, the words arrive. On Tuesday and Wednesday, the child copies them, maybe does a worksheet or a word search. On Thursday, panic sets in and there is an intense cram session. On Friday, the test measures how well the child performed under cramming conditions. Then the class moves on to a new list, because the calendar says so.

The system rarely circles back to check whether those words are still spellable two weeks later. If it did, the results would be inconvenient.

So the child learns a lesson that is devastating in its logic: spelling is something you do for a test, not something you build for life.

This is where a lot of capable kids start to fall apart emotionally. A child can sense when something is unfair, even if they cannot name the unfairness. They feel the effort they put in. They see the words disappear. They assume the problem must be them.

A child who struggles with reading or speech sounds may be hit harder, but even strong readers can be tripped up by list-based spelling. Reading is recognition. Spelling is recall. Recognition can be supported by context and pictures and sentence meaning. Recall is lonely. It asks, “What letters make these sounds?” with no choices provided. That is a different

kind of brain work.

And then there is the biggest hidden flaw in the list model: it treats spelling like a visual art instead of a sound-and-language skill.

When you ask a child to spell a word, you are asking them to do three things at once:

First, hold the word in their mind as sounds, in order.

Second, choose spellings for those sounds.

Third, write them down in the correct sequence.

Copywork mostly trains the third piece. Sometimes it supports the second piece a little, but only for that one word. It rarely strengthens the first piece at all, and the first piece is where many children actually need help. They cannot reliably hear all the sounds in the word, especially the quiet ones. If you cannot hear it, you cannot spell it, not consistently. The word becomes a guess.

That is why children often omit letters that represent sounds they did not notice. They write seprember for September, or frend for friend, or litel for little. Adults tend to see these as careless errors. They are not careless. They are honest. The child wrote what they heard.

If you want to fix spelling, you do not start by demanding better copying. You start by upgrading what the child can hear, and then you teach them the code for writing what they hear.

This is also why some children seem to improve when they are told to “sound it out,” and then stall again. “Sound it out” is only helpful if the child has been taught how to separate a word into its sounds and has been taught the common spellings for those sounds. Otherwise “sound it out” becomes “make a best guess and hope the teacher likes it.” That is not a strategy. That is anxiety with a pencil.

The list model keeps parents trapped in a loop: more words, more copying, more drilling, more frustration. It asks for time and effort, but it does not provide a method that makes time and effort pay off.

The good news is that the fix is not complicated, and it does not require you to become an expert. It requires a shift in what you practice.

Instead of practicing words as whole objects, you practice the process of building words: hearing the sounds, saying them clearly, tapping them in

order, building them with letter choices that match the sounds, and only then writing them.

Those steps will be our path forward. We will use them with words that are chosen on purpose, not because they share a theme, but because they share a teachable logic. That is when spelling starts to feel different at the kitchen table. Not easier in the sense of effortless, but clearer. Fairer. Like something your child can actually get good at, because it finally makes sense.

For now, if you take nothing else from this section, take this: a page full of copied words is not proof of spelling growth. It is proof that your child can copy. Spelling growth looks like this: your child hears a word, holds it, pulls it apart, and puts it back together on paper in a way that is explainable.

That is the opposite of a list. That is a map.

If the old model is a pile, the question becomes: what does a real map look like in the brain?

There is a term for the thing strong spellers do without thinking about it. It sounds technical, but the idea is wonderfully practical.

Orthographic mapping is the brain’s way of permanently storing a written word so you can spell it (and read it) quickly, without guessing.

That is all it means.

Not memorizing a photograph of the word.
Not “being a visual learner.”
Not having a magical spelling gene.

It means your child’s brain connects three pieces of information and then locks them together:

1. The sounds in the word, in order.
2. The letters or letter teams that represent those sounds.
3. The meaning of the word, so it is not just noise.

When those links are strong, the word is mapped. When they are weak or missing, the word is temporary. It can be copied, crammed, and even spelled correctly on a Friday test, but it will not stay.

You can see the difference at your kitchen table.

A memorized word looks like this: your child stares into the distance, brows pinched, and then tries something. They write becuase, pause, erase, write because, pause again, glance at you like they are asking for a weather report, and finally say, “Is that right?”

A mapped word looks like this: you say “because,” and they write because with the same calm speed they write their own name. No drama. No squinting at the ceiling. No asking the air for help.

The goal of spelling instruction is not to get through this week’s list. The goal is to build more and more of that second experience: words that live in the brain as reliable patterns.

Here is the part that surprises most parents: the brain does not map words by looking at them longer.

It maps words by doing a specific kind of work with them.

Think of it like tying a knot. You can hold two strings next to each other all day, but they are not connected until you twist and pull them into place. Orthographic mapping is that twisting and pulling. The strings are sound and spelling, and the knot is a word that stays.

So what is the twisting and pulling, in parent language?

It is your child paying attention to the sounds in a word and then matching those sounds to letters on purpose.

That is why earlier we said spelling is recall, not recognition. Your child has to hold the word as sounds and retrieve spellings, not just recognize a shape on a page.

When the instruction focuses on lists and copying, it can accidentally skip the sound part. It can turn spelling into a purely visual task: “Do you remember what it looks like?” That works for a small number of children for a small number of words, usually the ones with strong visual memory and strong reading exposure. But even those children hit a wall when words get longer, when spelling choices multiply, and when meaning starts to matter more.

English spelling is not random, but it is layered. There are several ways to spell the same sound. If your child hears the long A sound, they might choose a as in apron, a_e as in cake, ai as in rain, ay as in play, and so on. A list-based approach often treats each word as its own isolated fact: “Just remember this one uses ai.” Orthographic mapping teaches the brain to do something smarter: “In this word family, we use ai in the

middle. Let’s hear it. Let’s build it. Now write it.”

That is a map, not a pile.

Another way to picture orthographic mapping is to imagine your child’s brain building a tiny index card for each word.

On the front is the spoken word: because.

On the back is the stored spelling, but it is not stored as a blurry picture. It is stored as a set of connections: /b/ is spelled b, /ə/ is spelled e (in this word), /k/ is spelled c, /aw/ is spelled au, /z/ is spelled s, and so on.

Some of those connections are simple, some are advanced, and some are tied to meaning and word history. But the important part is this: the brain has reasons. It has hooks.

A copied word often has no hooks. It is like your child traced the word on a foggy window. It looks right while it is there, and then it disappears.

A mapped word is carved into wood.

Now, parents often ask a reasonable question: “If mapping is about connecting sounds to letters, isn’t that just phonics?”

It is related, but it is not identical.

Phonics is the code: the knowledge that certain letters represent certain sounds, and that we can blend those sounds to read words.

Orthographic mapping is the storage system: the way the brain uses the code to permanently remember specific words.

A child can know a lot of phonics rules and still be a weak speller if they are not trained to do the mapping work. And a child can read fairly well through context and pattern recognition and still be a weak speller, because spelling demands precise recall.

This is also why “more reading” does not always fix spelling.

Reading helps, especially when it is combined with good instruction, because it exposes children to words repeatedly. Repetition matters. But repetition without attention is like walking past a street sign every day and never learning the name of the road. Your eyes saw it, but your brain did not file it away.

Orthographic mapping is repetition plus attention to sound-spelling links.

That is why the five-step method we're about to use is built the way it is. It forces attention in the right order.

You will notice something else: mapping does not require long lessons.

It requires correct moments.

A five-minute practice where your child carefully hears three sounds, chooses letters for those sounds, and writes the word with full awareness will do more than a thirty-minute worksheet where their hand moves and their brain coasts.

This is good news for families. You do not need more time. You need a better use of time.

Let's go back to that kitchen table scene from Thursday night, the smudged list, the tight shoulders, the pencil hovering.

In the list model, your child's brain is often being asked to leap straight to the final step: write the word. The pencil is up, the pressure is high, and the internal process is a blur. When the child makes an error, adults tend to respond at the final step too: "No, look. It's because. Fix it."

That kind of correction can help in the moment, but it does not necessarily change what the brain does next time. It can even train a child to wait for the adult to provide the answer, which is the opposite of independence.

In a mapping-centered approach, you slow down before the pencil touches the paper. You focus on the first step that actually determines spelling success: can your child hear the word as separate sounds?

This matters more than most people realize.

If a child cannot reliably hear the /t/ at the end of kept, no spelling rule will save them. If a child cannot hear that jump has four sounds (j-u-m-p), they may write jup and feel confused when you tell them it is wrong. If a child cannot hear the difference between short i and short e in a word like still versus spell, they will make "careless" mistakes that are not careless at all. They are sound confusions.

Orthographic mapping begins with sound clarity, because the brain cannot map what it cannot perceive.

Then it moves to spelling choices, but not as guesses. As choices tied to patterns and rules.

This is where your role as the parent changes in a quiet but powerful way.

You stop being the checker of right answers.
You become the guide who helps your child do the internal work that produces right answers.

Instead of “Try again,” you learn to ask questions like:

“What word are we spelling?”
“Say it slowly.”
“How many sounds do you hear?”
“What is the first sound?”
“What letters can spell that sound?”
“Now build it.”
“Now write it.”

Those questions feel slower at first. They are. You are building a new habit. But they are also calmer, because they replace the panic of guessing with the steadiness of a process.

And that is what makes mapping so hopeful. It is not a talent. It is a process that can be taught.

Even for children who have failed at lists for years.

Even for children who have developed that protective shrug, the one that says, “I’m just bad at spelling.”

One of the most freeing truths you can give your child is this: spelling is not about remembering harder. It is about mapping smarter.

The list model accidentally teaches children to carry words around like fragile glass, hoping they do not drop them before Friday. Orthographic mapping teaches children to build words like Lego structures: piece by piece, with parts that can be named, moved, and understood.

Later in this book, you will learn rules that make English feel almost suspiciously logical, and you will learn phonograms that unlock huge percentages of words. You will learn why have looks like it does and why words don’t end in v. You will learn what silent E is doing all day besides “making the vowel say its name.” All of that matters.

But none of it matters more than this basic shift: spelling is stored

through sound-to-letter mapping, not through copying and hoping.

So if you have been looking at your child's notebook pages and thinking, "They did the work. Why didn't it stick?" you can exhale a little.

The work they did was real effort. It just wasn't the kind of work that builds the knot.

In the next chapter, we will start tying knots on purpose, with a method that keeps the pencil down until the sounds are out, and that turns spelling practice into something you can actually understand and repeat.

Not a pile of weekly strangers.

A map your child can use for life.

If you have made it this far, you have probably already tried to be the kind of parent who does not let spelling slide.

You have sat at the kitchen table on Thursday night. You have pointed to the smudged list. You have said, "Look at it again," and "You knew this yesterday," and "Slow down." You have watched your child's face change from effort to dread. And when the test comes back with a low score, you have felt that familiar mix of irritation and worry.

Irritation because you saw the practice page. The copying was done. The time was spent. Surely that should count for something.

Worry because the story beneath the score is heavier: What if my child really is just bad at spelling?

This is the moment I want to interrupt with as much clarity as I can.

Your child isn't the problem.

Not their intelligence.
Not their effort.
Not their character.
And very often, not even their attention.

What you are seeing is what happens when a perfectly normal brain is asked to store words using a method that does not match how the brain actually stores words.

A list-and-copy model makes it look like spelling is a moral issue. If a child gets words wrong, adults are tempted to reach for explanations that

sound like personality: careless, lazy, rushed, unmotivated, doesn’t try.

But spelling is not a personality test. It is a memory-and-language task. When the method is wrong, even a hardworking child can appear careless. When the method is right, that same child can look suddenly capable, because the task finally makes sense.

Let’s name what “careless” often means at the kitchen table.

It often means the child wrote what they heard.

In the earlier examples, seprember for September, frend for friend, litel for little, those are not the scribbles of a child who does not care. Those are the spellings of a child whose brain is doing its best with the information it has. They heard a word quickly, they grabbed the loudest sounds, and they wrote them down. That is not defiance. That is an honest attempt to translate speech into print without having a full sound map.

Other times, “careless” means the child cannot hold all the sounds in working memory long enough to write them.

Remember what spelling asks a child to do: hold the word as sounds, choose letters for those sounds, then write them in order. Working memory is like a small countertop. Some kids have a bigger countertop. Some have a smaller one. Some have a countertop that gets cluttered easily when stress is high.

A child with a small countertop might correctly say the word, might even be able to tap the sounds with you if you guide them, and still lose one sound when it comes time to write. That missing sound is not a character flaw. It is a load problem. The task is heavy, and the method adds more weight.

And sometimes “careless” means the child has been trained by copywork to rely on looking, not mapping.

Copywork can create a strange illusion: your child appears to practice spelling, but what they are actually practicing is visual matching. When the model is removed, the ability disappears. That is not because the child forgot to care. It is because the brain never did the sound-to-letter work that makes a word stick.

This is why, in the last section, we talked about orthographic mapping as a knot that ties sounds, letters, and meaning together. If the knot never gets tied, the word never becomes sturdy. It stays fragile, and fragile

learning always looks like “They knew it yesterday but not today.”

So if your child has that maddening pattern of performance, please hear this: the pattern itself is proof that your child is not broken. It is proof that the instruction is producing temporary memory instead of permanent mapping.

There is another reason parents land on “Maybe my child is the problem,” and it is one of the most damaging ideas in modern parenting.

We have absorbed the myth that reading and spelling should just happen if you read enough books.

This is partly true and partly cruel.

It is true that children who read a lot tend to have more exposure to words, and exposure helps. But exposure is not the same as instruction, and reading is not the same as spelling.

Reading is recognition. Spelling is recall. Recognition is supported by context: the sentence, the story, the picture in the child’s mind. If a child sees “because” in a sentence, they might recognize it quickly even if they could not spell it on demand. Recall offers no such support. Recall asks the child to pull the word out of their head from nothing but sound.

That is why a child can be an excellent reader and still be an uneven speller. And that is why telling a struggling speller to “just read more” can feel like telling a child who is drowning to “just swim more.” Practice without a method does not always build skill. Sometimes it builds fatigue.

When parents are told, directly or indirectly, that spelling should be automatic, we start interpreting difficulties as signs. Signs of laziness. Signs of low ability. Signs of a deeper problem.

Sometimes there is a deeper problem, and we will speak honestly about that throughout this book. Hearing differences, speech sound confusions, dyslexia, attention struggles, anxiety, these are real. They deserve support, not shame. But even when those factors are present, the basic truth remains: the list-and-copy model does not fix them. It often makes them worse by adding pressure without adding tools.

Here is what many children learn from years of this:

Spelling is something you either have or you don’t.

That belief is poison. And it grows quietly.

You can hear it in the way your child hesitates before writing. You can see it in the way they avoid big words, even when they know big words. You can feel it in the way writing assignments turn into battles, because writing is no longer about ideas. It is about the fear of being exposed as “bad at spelling.”

A child who believes they are bad at spelling starts to protect themselves.

Some children protect themselves by rushing. They scribble and turn it in fast, as if speed can hide mistakes. If someone corrects them, they can shrug and say, “I didn’t try.” Rushing is not always laziness. Sometimes it is armor.

Some protect themselves by becoming the class clown, or by arguing, or by melting down at homework time. Those behaviors can be exhausting, but they are often a signal: “I don’t know how to do this, and I’m tired of feeling stupid.”

Some protect themselves by shrinking. They write fewer words. They choose simpler vocabulary. They stop taking risks. They start saying, “I’m not a good writer,” when what they mean is, “I can’t spell the words I want to use, so writing feels dangerous.”

All of that can begin with something as ordinary as a weekly list.

This is why the emotional piece matters as much as the instructional piece. When you change the method, you are not just changing performance. You are changing the story your child is telling themselves about who they are.

So let’s replace the old story with a true one.

The true story is that English spelling is a code, and your child can learn the code.

Not as a pile of exceptions.
Not as fifteen unrelated facts a week.
As a system of sounds connected to letters, patterns, and meaning.

That does not mean spelling will become instantly easy. It means it will become explainable. And when something is explainable, it becomes teachable. When it becomes teachable, it becomes learnable. That is the chain your child needs.

Look back at the Thursday-night kitchen table scene. In the old model,

the child is asked to produce a word from memory, often with no clear steps, and then they are corrected at the end: “No, it’s wrong. Fix it.” The child feels judged, even when you are calm, because the only feedback they hear is right or wrong.

In a sound-first model, the feedback changes shape.

Instead of “wrong,” you can say, “Let’s check the sounds.”

Instead of “you knew this,” you can say, “Say it slowly with me.”

Instead of “try harder,” you can say, “How many sounds do you hear?”

That shift does something powerful. It moves spelling out of the realm of worth and into the realm of process.

And it gives your child a way to succeed that does not depend on being a certain type of kid.

You do not need a child with a photographic memory.
You do not need a child who sits still naturally.
You do not need a child who loves worksheets.

You need a child who can participate in a short routine of attention, with a parent who knows what to ask first.

That is why, in the next chapter, we are going to become very practical. We are going to replace the vague instruction of “practice your words” with five steps that force the brain to do the mapping work: HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

And we are going to keep the pencil down until the sounds are out.

Because once you accept that your child is not the problem, you can stop trying to motivate them through pressure and start equipping them through method.

That is the turning point.

The same child who looked careless may turn out to be a child who simply never learned how to hear every sound in a word.

The same child who looked lazy may turn out to be a child who was exhausted by guessing.

The same child who looked “not like a reader” may turn out to be a child

whose brain loves patterns once someone shows them the pattern.

You are not behind. You are not too late. You are not doing damage by starting at the kitchen table now. In fact, you are doing something quietly radical: you are pulling spelling out of the weekly list trap and giving your child a map.

And once a child has a map, they stop feeling lost.

They start moving.

Chapter 2: The Five Steps: HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE

By now you can probably picture that Thursday-night kitchen table without even trying. The smudged list, the tight shoulders, the hovering pencil, the quiet panic that arrives right on schedule. In the last chapter we named the real problem: the list-and-copy model asks a child to perform at the final step without training the steps that make spelling possible. It treats spelling like a photograph to memorize instead of a code to use.

So here is the turning point for your home.

We are going to stop practicing words as whole objects and start practicing the process that maps words into the brain.

That process has five steps, always in the same order:

HEAR
SAY
TAP
BUILD
WRITE

If you learn nothing else from this book, learn these five steps. They are simple enough to do at the kitchen table with a tired parent brain and a wiggly child. They are also deep enough to carry you from first-grade words to the longer, layered words that show up later: hopeful, jumped, musician, invisible, audition.

They work because they force the brain to do the knot-tying we talked about in Chapter 1. Each step strengthens one piece of orthographic mapping: sound, sequence, spelling choice, and finally written recall.

And they work for another reason that matters just as much: they take the heat off the child.

Instead of asking, “Can you spell this?” and waiting for a right-or-wrong moment, you ask, “Can we do the steps?” The child is no longer being judged on talent. They are being coached through a method.

Let’s walk through what each step actually means in parent language, and what it looks like in real life.

First: HEAR

This is where everything starts, and it is where the list model usually fails. Hearing does not mean hearing the whole word the way you hear it in normal speech. It means hearing that the word has parts.

When you say a word normally, your mouth slides through it quickly. Sounds blur. That blur is fine for conversation. It is not fine for spelling.

In the HEAR step, you give the word clearly, and your child's job is simply to take it in as a sound object.

You say, "The word is ship."

That's it. No letters. No hints. No "It starts like…" No "Remember on the list…" Just the spoken word, offered cleanly, like you're placing it on the table between you.

This step seems too small to matter, but it matters because it sets the rule of your new routine: we begin with sound, not with print.

Second: SAY

Now your child repeats the word back to you. This is not busywork. This is confirmation.

Children often mishear words, especially when they are tired, when the word is unfamiliar, or when they are used to guessing. A child might hear "slip" when you said "ship." If you skip the SAY step and head straight into writing, you may end up correcting a spelling that was never the real issue.

So you say, "The word is ship." Your child says, "Ship."

If they say it incorrectly, you simply give it again and have them repeat it. Calm. Matter-of-fact. No shame.

This step also helps with speech clarity. Some children blur sounds when they talk quickly. Saying the word clearly is like bringing it into focus before you try to take it apart.

Third: TAP

This is the step that changes everything, and it is the reason Chapter 3 will be called Tap Before Pencil.

Tapping means your child separates the word into its individual sounds, in

order, and marks each sound with a finger tap. You can tap on the table, on your arm, on the child's arm, on the floor, on your knee. It does not matter where, as long as the taps are distinct and countable.

For ship, the taps would be:

/sh/ (tap)
/i/ (tap)
/p/ (tap)

Three taps, because ship has three sounds, even though it has four letters.

This is where many parents have an aha moment. We have all been trained to think in letters. Tapping forces you and your child to think in sounds. That is where spelling lives.

It is also where many children realize, often with relief, that spelling is not "just remembering." It is hearing and matching.

At first, you will probably have to guide the tapping. That is normal. You might say, "Say it slowly with me: shhh-iii-p." Then, "How many sounds?" Then you tap together.

If your child gives the wrong number of taps, do not correct them by giving the spelling. Correct them by returning to the sound. "Let's stretch it. Listen for the last sound. Shhh-iii-p. Do you hear the /p/ at the end?" Then tap again.

When you correct at the sound level, you build the habit that will actually transfer to new words. You are teaching the brain what to pay attention to.

Fourth: BUILD

Now we take those sounds and choose spellings for them. This is where the code comes in, and this is why in later chapters you will learn phonograms and rules. But you do not have to know everything to begin. You only have to make the next correct choice.

Building is done with tiles, letter cards, a small whiteboard, or even scrap paper where you write letters big enough to move around. The point is that the child is not committed yet. Building is low-stakes. It invites problem-solving.

You say, "We tapped three sounds. What was the first sound?"

Child: “/sh/.”

You say, “Good. What can spell /sh/?”

At the beginning, you will supply options. “We can spell /sh/ with s-h. Let’s use sh.” You place the sh tile.

Then: “Next sound?”

Child: “/i/.”

“Good. Short i is i.” Place i.

“Last sound?”

Child: “/p/.”

“Letter p.” Place p.

Now you have built ship.

Notice what happened. Your child did not guess from the air. They worked from a sequence of sounds to a sequence of spellings. That is orthographic mapping in action, in a form you can see.

Building also gives you a place to teach gently and precisely.

If your child built sip instead of ship, you do not say, “No, that’s wrong.” You say, “Let’s check the first sound. Say the word again. Ship. What is the first sound?” Then you contrast: “Listen: sip starts with /s/. Ship starts with /sh/. Which one do we need?” You swap in sh. The child experiences the spelling as a match to sound, not a random correction.

Later, when the choices get more complex, building becomes even more valuable. If the long A sound could be a, a_e, ai, or ay, building is where you try the likely one, check against rules and patterns you’ve learned, and adjust. It keeps spelling from feeling like a trap.

Fifth: WRITE

Only now does the pencil touch the paper.

This is the step most traditional instruction starts with, and that is why so many children feel immediate pressure. Writing asks the child to do everything at once: remember the word, hold the sounds, choose

spellings, and form letters. If any earlier step is shaky, writing becomes a stress test.

In Sound First, writing is simply the final recording of a word you already built successfully.

You sweep the tiles back into a pile, or you cover them with a card. Now the word is no longer visible.

You say, “Write ship.”

Your child writes ship.

If they hesitate, you do not rescue with the spelling. You return to the process. “Let’s tap it first.” Tap. “Now write it.”

If they make an error, again, you do not treat it like failure. You treat it like information. “Let’s check the sounds. Tap it. What did you write for the first sound?” Then you fix the sound-spelling link, not the child’s character.

This is also where you will see why the old copying pages were so deceptive. When your child writes from recall, you find out what is actually mapped. That is not discouraging. It is useful. It tells you exactly what to teach next.

Put together, the five steps create a routine that is both structured and flexible. Structured, because you always know what to do next. Flexible, because you can spend extra time where your child needs it. Some children need more SAY and TAP because sound awareness is the weak link. Some children can tap easily but need help with BUILD because spelling choices are new. Some children can build perfectly but freeze at WRITE because handwriting and working memory collide. The steps show you where the snag is, so you stop fighting the wrong battle.

There is one more thing these steps do, and it might be the best part.

They give you and your child a shared language.

Instead of “You’re wrong,” you can say, “Let’s tap it.”

Instead of “Look harder,” you can say, “What’s the first sound?”

Instead of “Try again,” you can say, “Build it with tiles.”

That language changes the emotional temperature at the table. It

replaces the helplessness of guessing with the steadiness of procedure. Children relax when they know what comes next. Parents relax when they know how to help without turning into the answer key.

So when Thursday night comes again, and it will, you will not be staring down a smudged column of strangers asking your child to perform a magic trick.

You will have a map.

You will say, “We’re going to do the steps.”

And for the first time in a long time, your child will have something to do that is not “remember harder.”

They will hear the word.
Say the word.
Tap the sounds.
Build the spellings.
Write the word.

Five small moves that teach the brain a lifelong skill: how to turn speech into print, on purpose, with reasons.

In the next section, you’ll see this method in action in your first fully scripted lesson, so you can feel how it sounds at the kitchen table, in real parent-and-child dialogue. Then we’ll talk about why this order matters so much, and why the pencil stays down until the sounds are out.

Let’s make this completely concrete.

You do not need to wait for the “perfect time,” the “right materials,” or the moment when your child suddenly feels cooperative. You can do your first sound-first spelling lesson with a scrap of paper, a pencil, and something to tap on. If you have tiles, great. If you don’t, you can write a few letter tiles quickly on small pieces of paper: s, h, i, p, m, a, t, n. (You can even tear up an index card.) For today, we’re going to keep it simple and short on purpose.

A note before you start: your job is not to be impressive. Your job is to run the steps. Calmly. In order. If your child makes mistakes, that is not failure. That is the lesson showing you where mapping is thin.

Set a timer for 10 to 12 minutes. This is important. A short lesson done well is better than a long lesson that turns into a battle.

Here is your script. You can read it almost word-for-word the first time. Later, it will sound like your own voice.

Parent: “We’re going to do spelling in a new way today. No list, no copying. We’re going to do five steps: HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE. I’ll tell you what to do each time.”

Child: “Do I have to write?”

Parent: “Not at first. First we hear it, say it, tap it, and build it. The pencil stays down until the sounds are out.”

(If your child is already holding a pencil like a tiny sword, gently move it to the side. Make it a neutral, no-drama move, like sliding a cup out of the way.)

Parent: “Word one is ship.”

HEAR

Parent: “Listen. The word is ship.”

SAY

Parent: “Say it.”

Child: “Ship.”

(If your child says “sip,” don’t correct with annoyance. Just reset.)

Parent: “Listen again. Ship. Say it.”

Child: “Ship.”

TAP

Parent: “Now tap the sounds. Not the letters. The sounds. Tap on the table like this.”

(You tap first: /sh/ tap, /i/ tap, /p/ tap.)

Parent: “Now you.”

Child: (taps) “Sh… i… p.”

Parent: “How many sounds?”

Child: “Three.”

Parent: “Good. Ship has three sounds.”

BUILD

Parent: “Now we’re going to build ship with tiles.”

(If you have tiles, place them in a little pile. If you wrote paper tiles, do the same. If you have no tiles at all, you can “build” by writing big letters on the table paper and circling them, but moving pieces is nicer if you can.)

Parent: “What’s the first sound?”

Child: “Sh.”

Parent: “Yes, /sh/. We can spell /sh/ with s-h. Find s and h and put them together.”

Child: (places s and h)

Parent: “Next sound?”

Child: “I.”

Parent: “Short i is i. Add i.”

Child: (adds i)

Parent: “Last sound?”

Child: “P.”

Parent: “Add p.”

Child: (adds p)

Parent: “Read it.”

Child: “Ship.”

WRITE

Parent: “Now sweep the tiles back into the pile so the word is gone.”

(Do it together. Covering or clearing matters. The brain has to recall, not copy.)

Parent: “Tap the sounds once more.”

Child: (taps) “Sh… i… p.”

Parent: “Now write ship.”

Child: (writes ship)

Parent: “Nice. That is spelling from sounds.”

Pause here. Two things are happening at once. Your child is mapping the word, but you are also mapping the method. You are proving, with one small success, that spelling is not a magic trick or a Friday performance. It is a sequence.

Now do a second word that shares the same ending sound pattern, so your child feels the transfer. Use shop.

Parent: “Word two is shop.”

HEAR

Parent: “Listen. Shop.”

SAY

Parent: “Say it.”

Child: “Shop.”

TAP

Parent: “Tap the sounds.”

Child: (taps) “Sh… o… p.”

Parent: “How many sounds?”

Child: “Three.”

BUILD

Parent: “Build it. First sound?”

Child: “Sh.”

Parent: “Good. Use s-h again.”

Child: (places sh)

Parent: “Middle sound?”

Child: “O.”

Parent: “Short o is o.”

Child: (adds o)

Parent: “Last sound?”

Child: “P.”

Child: (adds p)

Parent: “Read it.”

Child: “Shop.”

WRITE

Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write it.”

Child: (taps, writes shop)

If your child writes sop, this is where you keep your promise: you do not treat it like a character issue. You treat it like information.

Parent: “You wrote sop. Let’s check the first sound. Say shop slowly.”

Child: “Sh-op.”

Parent: “Do you hear /sh/ at the start or /s/?”

Child: “Sh.”

Parent: “Right. /sh/ is two letters, s-h. Fix the first sound.”

That’s it. No lecture. No “you know this.” Just, “fix the sound.” The

correction is quick and specific.

Now add a word with a different beginning sound but the same ending so your child can practice listening, not memorizing a pattern visually. Use chop.

Parent: “Word three is chop.”

HEAR

Parent: “Chop.”

SAY

Child: “Chop.”

TAP

Parent: “Tap the sounds.”

Child: “Ch… o… p.”

BUILD

Parent: “First sound?”

Child: “Ch.”

Parent: “Yes, /ch/. We can spell /ch/ with c-h. Find c and h.”

(If you don’t have a c tile yet, you can say, “Today we’re going to write it on a little paper.” Make the new tile, keep going.)

WRITE

Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write chop.”

Now you’ve done three words in maybe six minutes, and your child has had multiple repetitions of the same process. That repetition is not boredom; it is wiring.

At this point, you can decide whether to stop while it still feels good or do one more word that adds a tiny twist. I recommend one more and then quit. Quit early. Leave them thinking, “That was doable.”

Do one word that is still simple but introduces a sound many kids

confuse: th. Use thin.

Parent: “Word four is thin.”

HEAR

Parent: “Thin.”

SAY

Child: “Fin.”

This is common, especially for younger children or children with speech sound differences. Notice what just happened: the SAY step did its job. You discovered a sound confusion before your child wrote anything.

Parent: “Good try. Listen carefully. Thin. Put your tongue between your teeth for the first sound: thhh-in. Say thin.”

Child: “Thin.”

(If your child struggles, keep it light. You are not doing speech therapy here. You are doing clarity. You can model and have them repeat. If they truly cannot produce the sound, you can still teach spelling by helping them hear it and label it, but keep expectations reasonable.)

TAP

Parent: “Tap the sounds in thin.”

Child: “Th… i… n.”

Parent: “How many sounds?”

Child: “Three.”

BUILD

Parent: “First sound is /th/. Today we’re going to use t-h for /th/. Put t and h together.”

Child: (places th)

Parent: “Next sound?”

Child: “I.”

Parent: “Short i, i.”

Child: (adds i)

Parent: “Last sound?”

Child: “N.”

Child: (adds n)

WRITE

Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write thin.”

Child: (writes thin)

Now stop. Even if it felt almost too easy. Especially if it felt almost too easy.

Parent: “That’s the whole method. You just spelled four words without copying any of them. You heard the word, you tapped the sounds, you built it, and then you wrote it.”

Child: “Can I be done?”

Parent: “Yes. And tomorrow, we’ll do a few more. Same steps.”

Before you walk away, take thirty seconds to lock in the most important emotional message. Not praise like “You’re so smart,” but process praise like “You did the steps.”

Parent: “What do we do before we write?”

Child: “Tap.”

Parent: “Yes. Pencil stays down until the sounds are out.”

That little line becomes your anchor on hard days. When Thursday night comes back around and the smudged list tries to reclaim your kitchen table, you will have a different move. You will not argue about effort or attention. You will say, “We’re going to do the steps.”

A few quick troubleshooting notes, because real children are not robots:

If your child rushes to write anyway, calmly cover the paper with your

hand and say, “Not yet. Tap first.” You are not being controlling. You are protecting the sequence that makes mapping possible.

If your child complains that tapping is babyish, call it what it is: a strategy strong spellers use. You can say, “This is what your brain needs to store words. It’s not babyish. It’s how we make it stick.” Then keep the lesson short and successful. Resistance often fades when the method works.

If your child gets silly, don’t try to squeeze learning out of chaos. Reset with structure: “We’re doing four words, then we’re done.” Or end early. Short, clean lessons build trust.

And if you, the parent, feel unsure, that’s normal too. You were trained by the list model just like your child was. You might catch yourself wanting to help by giving letter hints. Try to help by returning to sound instead: “Say it again. Tap it again. What’s the first sound?”

This is the beginning of a different kind of kitchen table moment. Same table. Same child. Same tired Thursday energy, sometimes. But a different story: spelling is not a pile of weekly strangers to survive. It is a code you can use, step by step, with a pencil that waits its turn.

If you did the scripted lesson in the last section, you may have walked away with a strange mix of feelings.

Relief, because your child spelled ship, shop, chop, thin without copying a single word three times.

Surprise, because it felt almost too simple to count as “real school.”

And maybe a little doubt, because the old model trained all of us to believe that spelling sticks only when a child suffers a little. When they stare at the list long enough. When they write it enough times. When they get corrected enough times.

Sound-first spelling feels different. It feels calm. It feels small.

And that is exactly why it works.

Spelling sticks when the brain does the right kind of work, in the right order, with the right amount of attention. Not more time. Not more pressure. Better wiring.

Let’s name what happened in that first lesson, because once you can see it, you will stop wondering whether this is “enough.”

You gave a word as sound: “ship.”

Your child had to hold it as sound, not as a picture, because there was no picture.

Then they repeated it, which exposed any mishearing early. That one moment with thin and “fin” was not a derailment. It was gold. You found the real snag before it turned into a spelling error and a fight. In list-based spelling, that confusion would have shown up as a wrong answer on Friday. Here, it showed up as information on Tuesday night at the kitchen table, and you fixed it with clarity instead of consequences.

Then you tapped. Tapping was not a cute activity. It forced your child to notice that ship has three sounds. That one fact is the beginning of every reliable spelling skill your child will ever build. A child who can count sounds can stop guessing. A child who cannot count sounds will keep guessing, even if they memorize a lot of lists.

Then you built the word, which did two crucial things at once.

First, it gave your child a way to choose letters for sounds without having to write yet. That matters because handwriting is a separate task. Many children have good language brains and tired hands. When we ask them to do language and handwriting at the same time, we accidentally make spelling look harder than it is.

Second, building created a moment of decision. Not a multiple-choice worksheet decision, but a real one: “What spells /sh/?” Your child had to connect the sound to the letters on purpose. That deliberate connection is the knot-tying we talked about in Chapter 1. That is orthographic mapping, happening in plain view.

Only after those connections were made did you write.

And you did one more thing that parents often skip because it seems too small to matter: you cleared or covered the built word before writing it.

That one move is the difference between copying and recall.

Copying says, “Keep your eyes on it and match what you see.”

Recall says, “Hold it in your head as sounds and retrieve the spellings.”

Recall is what writing demands in real life. No one holds up a word card while your child writes a paragraph. So each time you clear the tiles and ask for the word again, you are training the exact skill your child needs:

pulling a word out of memory on purpose.

Now here is the question behind this whole subchapter: why does this make spelling stick?

Because the method matches how the brain stores words.

A word becomes sturdy when your child's brain links sound to spelling in a specific, repeatable way. Not as a vague "I've seen it," but as a clear "I know what each part is doing."

The five steps do that linking in three layers.

First layer: the sounds get clean.

The HEAR, SAY, TAP part is sound training. It is also anxiety prevention. In the old model, your child might begin writing while still uncertain what they heard. They might write a whole word and only then discover it is not the right word. That creates the sensation of constantly being wrong, even when they are trying.

Sound-first flips that. We do not punish the brain for being uncertain. We clear the uncertainty before writing.

This is also why sound-first is so helpful for children who have been labeled careless.

Careless often means incomplete sound awareness. The child did not notice a sound, so they did not write a letter for it. When you force the sound awareness step first, you stop treating the symptom and start treating the cause.

Second layer: the sequence gets anchored.

Tapping creates order. A word is not just a collection of sounds; it is a sequence. Many spelling errors are not wrong sounds, but wrong order. Children write gril for girl or pslay for play, not because they are lazy, but because their internal sequencing is shaky under pressure.

Tapping is sequencing practice disguised as a simple game. Tap one, tap two, tap three. Left to right. First sound, next sound, last sound. You are building a mental track the word can sit on.

This is one reason the pencil stays down until the sounds are out. Once the pencil starts moving, many children go into production mode. They rush. They commit. They panic. And then the sequence collapses.

Tapping slows the process just enough to keep the sequence intact.

Third layer: the spelling choices get meaning.

BUILD is where sound becomes print, and it is where English starts to feel less like a pile of exceptions and more like a code.

In the first lesson, the choices were simple: /sh/ spelled sh, /ch/ spelled ch, short i spelled i. But the real power shows up as you move forward, because English has options. The same sound can be spelled in more than one way.

Sound-first does not hide that from your child. It also does not dump it on them like a chart to memorize.

Instead, it introduces choices when your child is ready and gives them a way to handle choices without panic.

A child who is trained on lists learns something like this: “In this word, the teacher wants ai.” That is not a system. That is obedience.

A child who is trained sound-first learns: “I hear the long A sound. I can spell it a few ways. Which one makes sense here?” That is independence.

And when you begin attaching rules and patterns to those choices, you add hooks. Not random facts, but reasons. Those reasons are what make words stick.

This is why the correction language matters so much.

In the list model, correction often sounds like, “No. Look. Fix it.”

In sound-first, correction sounds like, “Let’s check the sounds.”

That is not just nicer. It is smarter. Because “look and fix” teaches your child to depend on the outside model. “Check the sounds” teaches your child to use their internal model. And internal models are what you need when your child is alone in a classroom writing an essay.

You may have noticed that the five steps also change how your child experiences effort.

In the old model, effort is mostly invisible and mostly unrewarded. Your child copies the word, it looks like effort, and then the test says it did not count.

In the sound-first model, effort is visible and it pays off quickly. Your child taps accurately, builds accurately, writes accurately. The success is immediate and connected to the process they used. That trains something even deeper than spelling: it trains your child to believe that careful steps lead to success.

That belief is not motivational fluff. It is a learning engine.

It is also why short lessons are so powerful.

A long lesson tempts you to drift back into the old habits: more words, more pressure, more fatigue. A short lesson forces you to focus on quality. Clean sounds. Clear taps. Intentional building. Quick write. Done.

You are not trying to win spelling in one night. You are training a brain.

And brains like frequent, correct practice more than rare, exhausting marathons.

If you want a picture you can hold onto, use this one: spelling sticks when a word has an address in the brain.

Lists are like having visitors who never update their mailing information. They show up, you feed them for a week, and then they disappear.

Sound-first is like building a neighborhood. Each word gets sorted, built, and stored with roads that connect it to other words: shared sounds, shared patterns, shared rules, shared meanings. The more of those roads your child has, the faster new words find their place.

That is why, in the scripted lesson, you did not do one word and stop. You did ship, then shop, then chop. You gave the brain a tiny cluster, a pattern it could recognize through sound and build through print. Not fifteen strangers, but a small family.

This is also why the emotional tone changes when the method changes.

When children are forced to guess, they protect themselves. They rush, they shrug, they argue, they melt down, they avoid big words. Guessing creates fear because it creates random outcomes. You can try hard and still fail, because you never knew what you were supposed to do.

When children have steps, they can be brave.

They may not always be correct, but they are no longer helpless. They

can tap. They can build. They can check. They can fix.

And you, as the parent, are no longer stuck in the exhausting role of the answer key. You become what your child actually needs: a coach of the process.

So when you wonder whether this is enough, remember what you are actually practicing.

You are practicing hearing a word accurately.
You are practicing holding its sounds in order.
You are practicing matching those sounds to spellings on purpose.
You are practicing recalling the word without a model.

That is not a shortcut. That is the real work of spelling, distilled into five steps a family can actually do.

In the next chapter, we are going to lean hard into the step that makes everything else possible: TAP. We will talk about why tapping is not optional, why it belongs before pencil every single time, and how to practice segmentation in ways that feel like games instead of drills.

But for now, hold onto the anchor you gave your child at the end of the scripted lesson, because it is going to become your house rule:

“What do we do before we write?”

We tap.

Pencil stays down until the sounds are out.

Chapter 3: Tap Before Pencil: Hearing Words in Pieces

If Chapter 2 gave you the method, this part of the book gives you the muscle that makes the method work.

Tapping is not a cute add-on. It is not something you do when you have extra time or when your child is in a good mood. Tapping is the gateway skill that turns spelling from “remember the word” into “build the word.”

When we say “tap the sounds,” we are really talking about sound segmentation: the ability to hear a spoken word as a sequence of individual sounds and to hold those sounds in order.

That sounds simple until you try it with a real child at a real kitchen table.

Most of us, adults included, do not naturally listen to speech in slow motion. We listen for meaning. Your child hears “ship” and understands a boat. They do not automatically notice that their mouth did three distinct things: /sh/ then /i/ then /p/. In normal conversation, we do not need to notice that. The brain is efficient; it bundles sounds together into one smooth word and moves on.

Spelling asks your child to do the opposite. Spelling asks them to unbundle.

That unbundling is segmentation, and it is the first place where many children fall apart in the old list model. Not because they are careless. Not because they did not study. Because they were asked to write a word they had never truly heard in pieces.

Think back to the moment in the scripted lesson when you said “thin” and your child said “fin.” That was not a random slip. It was a perfect example of why tapping comes before pencil.

Your child’s brain grabbed the meaning of the word and a general sound shape, but it did not clearly register the first sound. If the pencil had been in motion, you would have gotten an error that looked like a spelling problem: fin. Then you would have corrected it at the end, where the brain often hears only one message: “Wrong.”

But because you used the SAY step and then the TAP step, you caught the real issue early: the sound was fuzzy. You fixed the fuzziness with a clear mouth cue, “Put your tongue between your teeth,” and then you asked for taps: /th/ /i/ /n/. Now the brain had something it could map.

That is the power of segmentation. It makes the invisible visible.

And here is the part parents find surprisingly freeing: a huge percentage of “spelling problems” are actually segmentation problems.

If your child cannot reliably hear all the sounds in a word, no amount of copying will make spelling consistent. Copying can temporarily cover the gap, because the child can visually match letters. But the minute the model disappears, the gap shows up again. The child writes what they heard, and what they heard was incomplete or blurred.

This is why tapping changes the emotional temperature at the table. It gives you something neutral to work on.

Instead of, “Why do you always forget the last letter?” you can say, “Let’s see if we can hear the last sound.”

Instead of, “You’re rushing,” you can say, “Keep the pencil down. Tap first.”

That might sound like a small shift, but it is a different kind of parenting moment. You are no longer negotiating effort and attitude. You are training perception.

So what does it mean to “hear the pieces inside a word”?

It means your child can do three things, more and more automatically over time:

First, they can count the sounds in a word.

Second, they can identify each sound in order.

Third, they can hold that sequence long enough to build and write.

Notice what is not on that list: naming letters. Segmentation happens before letters enter the conversation. That is why you can do tapping in the car, in the bathtub, walking the dog, while stirring spaghetti sauce. No worksheet required. In fact, removing print is sometimes the best thing you can do, because it forces the brain to use sound.

Here is a simple truth that will save you time: letters can lie, but sounds do not.

Letters can be silent. Letters can work as teams. One sound can be

spelled more than one way. But the spoken word has a specific set of sounds in a specific order. If your child can hear that set and keep it steady, spelling becomes a matching task instead of a guessing task.

Let’s return to ship, because it is such a clean example.

If you ask a child who is stuck in letter-thinking, “How many sounds in ship?” they may say four, because they see four letters in their mind: s-h-i-p.

But when you tap sounds, ship is clearly three. The first sound is not /s/ then /h/. It is /sh/. One sound.

This matters later, because English is full of these sound teams: /ch/, /th/, /sh/, /wh/, /ng/. If a child hears them as two separate sounds, they will scramble spelling choices. They might try to put an extra letter in, or leave one out, or reverse them. Tapping trains the brain to treat a team as a single unit of sound, which sets the stage for building with tiles in Chapter 4 and learning phonograms in Chapter 5.

Segmentation also explains one of the most confusing things parents see: the child who reads fine but spells terribly.

A child can often read a word by recognizing it as a whole, especially in context. That is recognition. But spelling requires recall, and recall demands sound-by-sound precision. If the child’s sound map is blurry, recall will be shaky even when reading seems strong. That is not a contradiction. It is two different skills.

Now, there is an important detail here that most programs do not say clearly enough: segmentation is a developmental skill, but it is also a trainable skill.

Some children develop strong segmentation early. They play with sounds naturally. They can hear the difference between slip and ship without effort. Other children need more guided practice. That does not mean they are behind forever. It means their brain needs deliberate training in what to notice.

The good news is that training segmentation does not require long lessons. It requires short, correct repetitions, the kind you are already doing with HEAR, SAY, TAP.

If you want a picture, think about learning to clap a rhythm.

At first, the rhythm feels like one blob. Then someone slows it down, and

you hear the beats. Then you can clap it. Then you can speed it back up. The rhythm did not change. Your perception changed.

Words are like that. Your child is learning to hear the beats.

And tapping is the physical tool that makes the beats countable.

Why physical? Why not just say the sounds?

Because bodies help brains.

When your child taps, they are doing something that is beautifully simple: they are turning time into space. Each tap gives a sound a spot. It keeps sounds from sliding together. It gives working memory a scaffold.

This is especially important for children who lose sounds when they write. Many parents describe it like this: “They can say the word, but when they write it, letters go missing.”

That is often a working memory load problem. Writing adds tasks: hold the word, remember the sequence, think about spellings, form letters, stay on the line. Tapping reduces the load by organizing the sounds before writing begins. The sequence is not floating anymore. It is anchored to taps.

This is also why we say, “Pencil stays down until the sounds are out.”

It is not a slogan to be cute. It is a protection against overload.

Once the pencil moves, many children shift into production mode. They are trying to get it done. Speed goes up, awareness goes down. Tapping interrupts that reflex and brings the child back to the real task: hear it, then map it.

Parents often ask, “But what about sight words? What about words you can’t sound out?”

This is where it helps to be very precise about what segmentation does and does not do.

Segmentation does not guarantee that your child will automatically know which spelling to choose for every sound. English has layers, and later chapters will give you rules and phonograms that make those choices logical.

But segmentation does guarantee something essential: your child will not

be trying to spell a word they have not fully perceived.

Even a so-called tricky word becomes less tricky when the sounds are clear. Take because, the word we used earlier as an example of fragile memorization. If a child cannot hold the sound sequence of because, they will produce all kinds of creative spellings: becuase, becase, beacause. Those are not “random.” They are the child trying to represent a sound chain that is unclear and fast.

When you slow the word down and tap what you actually hear, you begin to create order. The order might still need teaching, but it becomes teachable because it is visible.

Here is what that might sound like at the table with an older child, and notice how it keeps the tone calm:

Parent: “Say the word: because.”

Child: “Because.”

Parent: “Now tap the sounds you hear. Don’t worry about letters yet.”

Child: “B… uh… k… aw… z.”

Parent: “Good. You heard five sound beats. Now we can decide how to spell each beat.”

Even if the spelling choices are advanced, the child is no longer lost. They are holding a sequence. They have something to build from.

That is the real promise of sound segmentation. It gives your child a handle.

And it gives you a diagnostic tool that is far more useful than a spelling score.

When your child misspells a word, you can ask, “Did they hear all the sounds?” If the answer is no, you know what to practice: segmentation. If the answer is yes, then the issue is probably spelling choices, patterns, or rules, which we will address with tiles, phonograms, and suffix rules in later chapters.

This is how the five steps keep you from fighting the wrong battle.

If your child spells jump as jup, the problem is almost never “They forgot the m.” The problem is usually that they did not hear or hold the /m/

sound in the middle. That is a TAP issue, not a motivation issue.

If your child spells friend as frend, the problem is not that they are lazy. They heard /frend/ and wrote what they heard. Later you will teach that in this word, that vowel sound is spelled ie. But you start by honoring what the child did right: they heard the sounds in order. Then you upgrade the spelling choice with a reason.

Segmentation lets you do that. It lets you say, truthfully, “Your sounds are good. Now let’s fix the spelling for that sound.”

Or, if the sounds are not good yet, it lets you say, truthfully, “Let’s get the sounds first. Then spelling will get easier.”

That is what makes tapping feel powerful instead of babyish. It is not a trick. It is the foundation.

In the next part of this chapter, we are going to talk about why we wait to write, even when your child is eager, even when you are tempted to hurry. We will take the pressure off the pencil and put it where it belongs: on hearing clearly, one sound at a time.

Because once your child can reliably hear the pieces inside words, spelling stops being a weekly performance.

It becomes a buildable skill.

The moment a child picks up a pencil, something changes in their brain.

You can see it at the kitchen table. Their shoulders rise a little. Their eyes narrow. Their speed increases or their confidence collapses. Even children who love to write stories can become strangely tense when the task is “spell this word.” The pencil turns the word from a sound you can play with into a performance you can fail.

That is why we wait.

“Pencil stays down until the sounds are out” is not a cute catchphrase from Chapter 2. It is a protective rule that keeps your child in the part of the process where learning actually happens.

Because here is the hard truth: writing is the heaviest step.

Writing asks for everything at once.

Hold the word in working memory.

Keep the sounds in order.
Choose spellings.
Remember rules.
Form letters.
Stay on the line.
Finish before you get corrected.

If your child struggles with any one of those pieces, the pencil becomes a distraction. It pulls attention away from hearing and mapping and dumps it into survival mode: hurry up, get it done, hope it's right.

And survival mode is where guessing lives.

You already know what guessing looks like. It's that moment from Chapter 1: your child writes becuase, erases, writes becase, looks at you for the answer in your face, and asks, "Is that right?" The child isn't building. They're tossing letters onto paper like coins into a fountain.

When the pencil leads, the brain tends to skip the invisible work. The child starts writing before they know what they're writing. They may be trying to be helpful. They may be trying to be fast. They may be trying to protect themselves from feeling stuck. But either way, the pencil is now steering the lesson, and the pencil is not trained to steer. The pencil only knows how to move.

Sound-first flips the steering wheel back to the brain.

We wait to write because we want the brain to do the work that makes spelling stick: segmentation and mapping. That work happens before the letters are formed on the page. It happens when your child hears the word clearly, holds the sounds steady, and chooses spellings on purpose.

Waiting also changes the emotional stakes. If the pencil is already in motion and your child realizes they're unsure, they experience that uncertainty as failure. The erasing begins. The paper gets smudged. The tone changes.

But if the pencil hasn't started, uncertainty is just a signal. It means, "We're still in TAP and BUILD. We're still figuring it out." That is a much safer place for a child to be.

Think back to your first scripted lesson in Chapter 2. You said "thin," and your child said "fin." That could have become a wrong answer with a correction. Instead, because you hadn't started writing, it became a simple clarity moment. You reset the sound: tongue between teeth, "thhh-in." Then you tapped: /th/ /i/ /n/. Then you built. Then you wrote.

That is exactly the point. Waiting to write moved the correction upstream, to the place where it could actually improve future spelling.

Most spelling battles are downstream battles.

The child writes.
The adult corrects.
The child “fixes” by copying the correct spelling.
Everyone is tired.
Nothing is mapped.

Sound-first is upstream.

We fix the hearing.
We fix the order.
We fix the choice.
Then we write once, cleanly, from recall.

This is also why waiting to write is so important for working memory, that small countertop we talked about in Chapter 1.

When the countertop is small, you want fewer items on it at once.

Writing adds items. The child has to think about letter formation and spacing and whether they started too far to the right. For some kids, that extra load is enough to make a sound drop out. The child taps jump correctly, /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/, but as soon as they start writing, the /m/ disappears and you get jup.

Parents often interpret that as “They’re skipping letters.” But what is really happening is that the child’s brain is dropping a ball while juggling too many tasks.

Waiting to write reduces juggling. Tapping organizes the sounds. Building makes spelling choices concrete without committing to handwriting. By the time you get to WRITE, the word has already been held, counted, checked, and assembled. Writing becomes a simple recording task, not a high-wire act.

There’s another reason we wait that isn’t about memory at all. It’s about attention.

A pencil is a magnet. Children are trained, from the earliest years of school, that the real work is what happens on paper. If they can put something on paper, they feel productive. If they can’t, they feel behind.

Many kids will start writing even when you didn’t ask them to, because writing feels like doing.

But the kind of doing we need first is listening.

It takes maturity to sit with a word in your mouth and in your ears and not rush to put letters down. That maturity can be taught. That is part of what your routine is teaching. You are training your child to trust an invisible process.

And you are training yourself, too.

Parents often rush because we want to help. We see our child hesitate, and we want to remove the discomfort. We might give the first letter. We might mouth the word slowly with extra emphasis. We might point to a similar word on the list. Those are natural instincts, but they can accidentally teach dependence on external cues.

When you insist on TAP before WRITE, you give your child a different message: “You have a way to find this inside the word. We’re going to use the word itself, not my hints, to solve it.”

That is independence.

Now let’s get very practical. What does waiting to write look like on a normal day, when your child is not cooperating like a scripted lesson?

It looks like you treating the pencil like a later tool, not the main tool.

If your child reaches for it too soon, you do what you promised in Chapter 2: you keep it neutral. No lecture, no scolding, no power struggle. Just a routine correction.

You can say, “Not yet. Tap first.”

If you need to, you can physically move the pencil to the side and put your hand gently over the paper. Not as a punishment. As a guardrail. Then you immediately give them something to do: “Say it. Tap it.”

Children tolerate a limit much better when the limit comes with a next step.

Here is a common kitchen-table moment that shows why this matters.

Parent: “Word is chop.”

Child: (already writing) “C… h… o… p…”

Parent: “Stop. Erase it.”

That moment tends to create heat. The child feels interrupted and corrected before they even finish. You feel like you’re chasing their pencil.

Now the sound-first version:

Parent: “Word is chop.”

Child: (reaches for pencil)

Parent: “Pencil stays down until the sounds are out. Say chop.”

Child: “Chop.”

Parent: “Tap it.”

Child: (taps) “Ch… o… p.”

Parent: “Good. How many sounds?”

Child: “Three.”

Parent: “Build it.”

Child: (builds ch-o-p)

Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Now write.”

Now the pencil gets to do what it does best: record something the brain already organized.

Waiting to write also protects your child from the most common trap in spelling practice: confusing copying with knowing.

We talked about this in Chapter 1, but it becomes even clearer when you watch it happen.

If the correct spelling is visible while your child writes, they can succeed without mapping. Their eyes do the work. Their hand follows. That feels like success, but it is a fragile success.

When you wait, build, then cover the tiles before writing, you create an

honest moment. Can the child retrieve the word from the sound structure, without a model?

That moment is not designed to expose your child. It is designed to reveal what is truly mapped so you can teach what is not.

And here is the key: when you do this, a mistake becomes useful.

If your child writes sop instead of shop, you don't say, "You forgot the h." You say, "Let's check the first sound. Tap it." Now you have a clear diagnosis. The child either didn't hear /sh/ or didn't connect /sh/ to sh yet. Either way, you know exactly what to practice next. The mistake is no longer proof of being "bad at spelling." It is a signpost: strengthen this link.

Waiting to write also helps with a problem that shows up in older kids: the child who tries to spell by "how it looks" even when they have phonics knowledge.

These kids often say things like, "I don't know, it just looks weird." They've been trained to judge spellings visually, but without clear internal rules. When the word "looks wrong," they rewrite it three different ways, hoping one will feel right.

That's still guessing, just dressed up in nicer clothes.

Tapping pulls them out of that visual fog. It asks a different question: "What sounds are actually in this word?" That question is stabilizing. It gives the child something solid to stand on before they evaluate spelling choices.

You are not banning visual memory. Visual memory is part of reading and spelling. But in this method, visual memory becomes the result of mapping, not the strategy your child relies on in the dark.

So yes, we wait to write because writing is heavy, because it triggers performance mode, because it hides sound problems, because it invites copying, because it overloads working memory, because it encourages visual guessing.

But there is one more reason, and it might be the most important for your family.

We wait to write because it keeps your relationship intact.

When the pencil is the main event, your child's errors are public. They're

right there on paper, permanent and visible. Corrections feel sharper. Tone escalates faster. The child’s identity gets tangled up with the page.

When sound is the main event, your child can be wrong safely.

They can mishear thin as fin and simply try again.
They can miss a sound and tap again.
They can build the wrong tile and swap it without shame.

Sound work is temporary and fixable. It invites play, adjustment, and progress.

Then, when you finally write, you are not starting with vulnerability. You are finishing with confidence.

That is what you want your child to experience over and over: writing as the calm last step, not the scary first step.

So if you find yourself tempted to speed things up by letting your child “just write it,” remember what you are really trying to build.

You are not trying to produce a paper full of words.

You are trying to produce a brain full of mapped words.

And mapped words are built before the pencil touches the page.

In the next section, we’ll take this one step further and make tapping practice easier and lighter, so your child can get strong at segmentation without feeling drilled. Because once tapping becomes automatic, waiting to write stops feeling like a rule you enforce and starts feeling like the way spelling naturally works.

If tapping is the gateway skill, then practice is how you make the gate easy to walk through.

Most parents are willing to try tapping in a lesson, especially after they see it work with ship and shop. The sticking point is what happens on day three or day ten, when your child rolls their eyes, or when you’re tired, or when the word is longer than chop and the sounds don’t feel obvious anymore.

This is where families accidentally drift back to pencil-first. Not because they don’t believe in the method, but because tapping still feels like a deliberate activity instead of an automatic habit.

So the goal of this section is simple: make tapping so normal, so quick, and so low-pressure that your child will do it without a fight and without you having to make speeches about it.

Here’s the first thing to know: tapping practice does not have to look like a lesson.

In fact, it works better when it doesn’t.

You are training your child’s ear and working memory, not their ability to sit still. Two minutes of correct tapping done frequently will do more than twenty minutes of frustrated drilling. Your child does not need to “master segmentation” before you move on. Segmentation gets stronger as you keep using it, the same way balance gets stronger as you keep riding a bike.

Below are several games and tips. You do not need all of them. Pick two or three that fit your child’s personality and rotate them. The variety keeps tapping from feeling like one more school-ish demand.

The “Say it, Tap it, Show me” game

This is the simplest one, and it fits right into your existing five-step routine.

You say a word.
Your child repeats it.
Your child taps the sounds.
Then, instead of writing, they show you the number of sounds with their fingers.

Parent: “Word is lunch.”
Child: “Lunch.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: (taps) “L… u… n… ch.”
Parent: “How many sounds? Show me.”
Child: (holds up four fingers)

This tiny extra move does two good things. First, it makes the taps more intentional. Second, it gives you a quick check without turning it into a quiz.

Be careful about one trap: your child may want to count letters. That’s fine information. If they hold up five fingers for lunch because they’re thinking l-u-n-c-h, you don’t correct by saying, “No, it’s four.” You correct by returning to sound.

“Let’s stretch it: lll-uuu-nnn-ch. Do you hear /ch/ at the end? That’s one sound. Tap it again.”

Use short, clear words when you’re building momentum, especially at first: ship, shop, chop, thin, sun, map, dish, fish, rock, jump, hand. You’re not trying to impress anyone with word difficulty. You’re trying to build a habit that will scale up later.

The “Mystery Word” game (for children who like to guess)

Some kids resist tapping because it feels slow. They want the answer. They want to write. They want to be done. For those children, make tapping the path to a small win.

You tap, they guess.

Parent: (taps three times slowly, without saying the word) “I’m thinking of a word with three sounds. Listen: /sh/ /i/ /p/.”
Child: “Ship!”
Parent: “Yes. Now you tap a word for me.”

This game is deceptively powerful because it reverses the usual order. Your child learns that tapping is not the obstacle before the real activity. Tapping is the activity. It also strengthens blending, the ability to push sounds back together, which supports both reading and spelling.

Keep it playful and quick. Two or three rounds is enough.

If your child taps sounds out of order, don’t treat it as wrong. Treat it as part of the game.

Parent: “I heard /p/ at the start of your taps, so my mouth made a different word. Let’s try again and keep the sounds in order.”

Remember, sequencing is one of the biggest hidden gifts of tapping.

The “Robot Talk” game (stretch and tap)

Some children need help slowing a word down. Normal speech is fast and slippery, and some sounds vanish inside that speed. Robot Talk is simply saying the word in a stretched, slightly silly way so each sound gets a chance to be heard.

You can say, “Let’s say it like a robot.”

Cat becomes “c-a-t.”
Jump becomes “j-u-m-p.”
Splash becomes “s-p-l-a-sh.”

Then you tap what you said.

This is especially helpful for final sounds that children drop. If your child often forgets the last sound, stretch the end on purpose.

Parent: “Say ‘jump’ like a robot: j-u-m-puh.”
Child: “J-u-m-puh.”
Parent: “Good. Now tap what you actually hear: /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/.”

The goal is not to add a sound. It’s to make the existing sound audible. Many kids need the ending held just a hair longer before their brain reliably registers it.

The “Sound Walk” (for kids who need movement)

If sitting at the table makes your child wiggly or resistant, take tapping off the table.

You can do this down a hallway or across a living room rug.

Each sound is one step.

Parent: “Word is ‘stamp.’ Say it.”
Child: “Stamp.”
Parent: “Now walk the sounds.”

Child takes five steps: /s/ /t/ /a/ /m/ /p/.

Then you walk it back by saying the sounds again and blending into the word at the end.

This turns tapping into full-body segmentation. It’s the same skill, just larger.

If you have a child who tends to rush and scribble, movement often slows them down in a way that feels good instead of controlling. It also makes “pencil stays down until the sounds are out” feel less like a restriction and more like a game you play first.

The “Switch It” game (minimal pairs)

Remember the thin/fin moment in the first scripted lesson. That wasn’t

just a one-time issue. Many spelling struggles are really sound confusions: th/f, b/p, t/d, short i/short e, ch/sh, m/n.

You can strengthen your child's ear by using pairs of words that differ by one sound. Say one, tap it, then switch one sound and tap again.

Thin / fin
Ship / sip
Chop / shop
Pin / pen
Bat / pat
Cap / cab

Parent: "Say 'ship.' Tap it."
Child: /sh/ /i/ /p/
Parent: "Now say 'sip.' Tap it."
Child: /s/ /i/ /p/
Parent: "What changed?"
Child: "The first sound."

That last question is the key. You're training your child to notice sound position: first, middle, last. That's exactly what they need when spelling choices get more complex later.

Keep your tone curious, not corrective. The game is about noticing, not about catching mistakes.

Tapping tips that prevent the most common stalls

Tip 1: Tap sounds, not syllables.

Some older children will clap syllables because they've done it in school: bas-ket, win-dow. That's fine for syllable awareness, but spelling needs sound awareness.

So be gentle but firm: "We're tapping each sound, not each chunk."

If your child says, "That's too many," you can say, "Yes, it's more detailed, and that's why it helps spelling."

Tip 2: Don't require perfect sound labels.

Your child does not have to say phonetic symbols or fancy terminology. They just need to be consistent and accurate enough that you both know what sound they mean.

If they say “the quiet uh sound” for the schwa in about, that’s fine. If they say “chuh” for /ch/, that’s fine. You can refine later. Right now, you’re building awareness.

Tip 3: Stop before frustration.

If tapping turns into tears or power struggles, you have gone too long.

End with a win. Do one easier word and stop.

Parent: “We’re going to do one more word that feels easy, then we’re done.”
Child: (exhales)
Parent: “Word is ‘fish.’ Tap it.”
Child: /f/ /i/ /sh/
Parent: “Good. That’s it for today.”

That ending matters. It teaches your child that tapping is doable and finite.

Tip 4: Make it a house rule, not a debate.

If you keep renegotiating tapping, your child will keep trying to negotiate it away. The calmest way is to treat it like washing hands before dinner. No drama, just the order of operations.

Parent: “What do we do before we write?”
Child: “Tap.”
Parent: “Yes. Pencil stays down until the sounds are out.”

You’ve already established that line in Chapter 2. Use it. The repetition is not nagging; it’s routine.

Tip 5: When your child makes a spelling error, tap first, talk second.

This one will save your tone.

If your child writes jup for jump, the temptation is to point at the missing letter and correct. But sound-first keeps you upstream.

Parent: “Tap ‘jump’ for me.”
Child: /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/
Parent: “Good. Which sound didn’t make it onto the paper?”
Child: “/m/.”
Parent: “Right. Add the letters for /m/.”

Now the correction is not “you forgot an m,” which can sound like blame. It’s “a sound didn’t make it onto the paper,” which sounds like process.

A simple practice plan that doesn’t take over your life

If you want structure, here is a simple plan that fits into your day without becoming a new subject you dread.

Three days a week, do a 10 to 12 minute spelling lesson using the five steps (like you did with ship and shop). Use tapping inside the lesson every single time.

On the other days, do two minutes of tapping games only. No writing. No tiles. Just sound work. Choose one game and do five words.

That’s it.

Those two-minute sessions are where tapping becomes automatic. Then, when you sit down to build and write, tapping won’t feel like the extra thing. It will feel like what you do first, the way you always do.

And that’s the real win of practicing tap: you’re not just teaching your child to tap words in a lesson. You’re teaching their brain to naturally pause, segment, and hold sounds in order.

Once that habit is in place, spelling stops being a sprint toward the pencil.

It becomes what we’ve been building all along: a calm, repeatable way to turn speech into print.

In the next chapter, we’ll give those sounds something to sit on in your child’s hands: tiles. Red vowels, blue consonants, and letter teams that make building words feel as concrete as stacking blocks. But the success of tiles will still rest on the skill you’re strengthening right now.

Before the letters come out, the sounds have to come out.

Tap first. Always.

Chapter 4: The Tiles: Hands-On Spelling with Color and Movement

After a few weeks of tapping, something wonderful starts to happen.

Your child begins to expect the pause before the pencil. They stop lunging for the page as quickly. They can hold a word in their mouth long enough to count its sounds. And then you run into the next very normal, very predictable bump: they can hear the sounds, but they still feel shaky about which letters to choose.

This is where tiles earn their keep.

Tiles are not a craft project. They are not a cute add-on. They are a bridge between sound and writing that makes spelling feel concrete, adjustable, and explainable. They also solve a practical problem that shows up in almost every home: handwriting fatigue.

When spelling practice is pencil-only, every single attempt costs your child a written commitment. If they're unsure, they either freeze or guess and then erase. If they erase a lot, the page gets messy, and messy pages make kids feel like failures even when they're learning. Tiles lower the cost of trying.

You can build, check, swap, and rebuild without smudges, tears, or the emotional weight of "I already wrote it wrong."

Now, the color piece is more important than most parents expect.

In this book we're going to use a simple convention: red for vowels, blue for consonants. (If your tiles aren't colored, you can still use them; color just adds an extra layer of clarity. You can also mark vowels with a red dot using a marker. Keep it simple.)

Why color at all?

Because English words are made of sound moves, and the biggest sound move is the vowel.

Consonants shape the edges of a word, but vowels are the engine. They carry the voice. They often change when a word changes (hope to hoping, ride to riding, define to definition). They also cause many of the spelling confusions children experience, because one vowel sound can be spelled several ways.

Color helps your child's eyes do what their ears are learning to do: notice the structure.

It helps them see, at a glance, "Here is the vowel sound spot in this word. Here is what we're doing with it."

And it keeps you, the parent, from overtalking.

A lot of spelling frustration comes from adults saying too much while children are trying to hold a word in working memory. Tiles let you point instead of lecture. You can simply slide a tile forward and ask, "What sound is this?" That is calm instruction. No speeches required.

Let's take the words you already used in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 and watch how color makes them clearer.

Ship.

When your child taps ship, they get three sounds: /sh/ /i/ /p/. With tiles, you build those sounds into a visible sequence. In your pile you have a blue sh tile (or s and h together), a red i tile, and a blue p tile.

When you lay them down, your child sees a pattern that will show up in thousands of words: blue, red, blue.

That pattern is not decoration. It is a map. It tells your child, "There is one vowel sound in this word, sitting in the middle, surrounded by consonant sounds."

Now compare ship to shop.

Same first and last consonant sounds, different vowel. With color, the change is almost embarrassingly obvious. Only the red tile swaps.

ship: sh i p
shop: sh o p

This is exactly what you want your child to experience: spelling as controlled change, not random memorization. They are not trying to remember two whole pictures. They are noticing that the word frame stays stable and the vowel sound changes.

That is orthographic mapping getting stronger, because the brain loves contrast.

And now compare shop to chop.

Again, only one tile changes, but it’s a blue tile this time. The vowel stays the same, the ending stays the same, and the beginning consonant changes.

shop: sh o p
chop: ch o p

This is the same “Switch It” game from tapping practice, but now it’s visible. Your child can literally move the first tile and keep the rest.

Here is what that does inside the brain: it separates sound identity from letter identity.

In the old list model, children often treat a word as an unbreakable object. If you change one part, the whole thing feels like a new stranger. Tiles teach the opposite: a word is a build. A word has parts. And you can work with those parts.

Now let’s talk about the part parents sometimes misunderstand at first.

Red vowels does not mean “the letters a, e, i, o, u.”

It means “the spelling that is representing the vowel sound in this word.”

Sometimes that will be one letter, like i in ship. Sometimes it will be a team, like ai in rain. Sometimes it will be a silent-e pattern, like a_e in cake.

Tiles help your child stop thinking “vowels are these five letters” and start thinking “vowels are the sound slots where my voice is.”

That shift matters later when you get to rules like silent E and vowel teams, because your child won’t experience them as brand-new concepts. They’ll experience them as new ways to handle the red spot.

You can begin building that understanding right now, even with simple words.

Try this quick kitchen-table sequence, using exactly the routine you already have.

Parent: “We’re going to do the steps. Word is shop.”
Child: “Shop.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/sh/ /o/ /p/.”

Parent: “Build it with tiles.”

As your child builds, you can casually name what the colors mean without turning it into a lecture.

Parent: “Blue is a consonant sound. Red is the vowel sound. Put the blue /sh/ first.”
Child: (places sh)
Parent: “Now the red vowel sound.”
Child: (places o)
Parent: “Now the last blue sound.”
Child: (places p)

Then you clear and write as usual.

The goal is not that your child memorizes the terms consonant and vowel immediately. The goal is that their eyes begin to expect that every word has a vowel sound spot, and that spot is worth paying attention to.

Color becomes even more helpful when you move beyond CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant) into words with blends and teams.

Take the word jump, the one we used earlier to explain missing sounds. When children write jup, it’s often because /m/ didn’t make it onto the page. Tiles help because you can build jump in a way that forces each sound to have a place.

Tap it: /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/ (four sounds)

Build it with tiles: j (blue), u (red), m (blue), p (blue)

When your child lays those down, they can see that the word ends with two blue tiles. There’s nothing wrong with that; it’s just a consonant cluster at the end. But visually, it’s harder to “skip” the m when it’s a physical tile sitting there, taking up space.

If your child leaves it out, you can respond upstream, exactly as Chapter 3 taught:

Parent: “Tap jump again.”
Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/.”
Parent: “Show me which tile is /m/.”
Child: (points to m)
Parent: “Good. Put it in the word.”

Notice what you didn’t do. You didn’t say, “You forgot an m.” You said,

“Which sound is this?” The correction stays inside the code.

Tiles also help when a child confuses sounds that are close together, like thin and fin.

In Chapter 2 you saw your child (or you imagined a very real child) say “fin” when you said “thin.” That’s a sound confusion. Tiles let you slow it down without making it a big deal.

You can build both words side by side.

thin: th (blue) i (red) n (blue)
fin: f (blue) i (red) n (blue)

Now the vowel spot is identical. The ending is identical. The only difference is the first tile. That’s not just helpful for spelling; it’s helpful for hearing. Your child’s brain learns, “Oh, these are two different starting sounds that create two different words.”

This is another quiet advantage of tiles: they link spelling to meaning without you having to deliver a vocabulary lesson.

Thin is not fin. The sound change changes the word. And the tile change makes that reality visible.

Now, you might be thinking, “My child already knows vowels are important. We’ve done vowel worksheets for years.”

Maybe. But worksheets often teach vowels as a category, not as a living part of words.

A vowel worksheet might ask a child to circle all the vowels in a list of words. That can be fine as a small activity, but it does not automatically teach the child where the vowel sound is and what spelling is representing it. It also doesn’t help them make spelling decisions under pressure.

Tiles do.

When a child builds with tiles, they are making a vowel choice in real time, in a specific word, for a specific sound. They are practicing the exact decision-making that spelling requires.

And color supports that decision-making by making the vowel spot easy to locate.

Here is a simple habit that will make your tile work more powerful from day one: whenever you build a word, ask one quick question about the red tile.

“What is the vowel sound in this word?”

That’s it.

Not “What vowel letter do you see?” but “What vowel sound do you hear?”

Ship: short i.
Shop: short o.
Thin: short i.
Jump: short u.

This keeps your method honest. We are sound-first. Color serves sound, not the other way around.

If your child answers with a letter name (“It’s i”), you can gently redirect without turning it into a correction.

Parent: “Yes, the letter is i. What sound is it making in this word?”
Child: “/i/.”
Parent: “Good. That’s the vowel sound.”

Over time, your child will start to locate the vowel sound quickly, and that skill becomes a compass when words get longer.

One more reassurance before we move on: tiles are not about making spelling dependent on materials.

Your child will not need tiles forever. Tiles are training wheels for the brain.

They let your child practice the mapping work with less load and more clarity. Then, as their sound-to-spelling connections become automatic, you will use tiles less and writing more. The destination is independence on paper, in real writing, without any tools.

But right now, at this stage, tiles are a gift. They keep spelling in the buildable zone.

They keep the process calm.

And they give your child a way to see what they are hearing: consonant

edges in blue, vowel engine in red, sounds lined up in order like stepping stones.

In the next section, we'll get even more practical about how to make tiles (without turning your living room into a craft store) and how to use them in a way that stays fast, clean, and consistent with the five steps you already know.

Because tapping taught your child to hear the beats.

Now tiles will give those beats a body.

You do not need a fancy kit to use tiles.

If you have them, great. If you don't, you can make a perfectly effective set in one short sitting with materials you already have. The goal is not to create something Pinterest-worthy. The goal is to create small, movable pieces that let your child build words without committing to pencil too soon.

Remember what we said at the end of the last section: tiles are training wheels for the brain. They keep spelling in the buildable zone. Paper tiles do that just as well as plastic ones, as long as they are clear, consistent, and easy to handle.

What you need (keep it boring on purpose)

Here is the simplest version:

Index cards, cardstock, or a cereal box cut into rectangles
Scissors
A marker or pen
Optional: crayons or colored markers (red and blue)
Optional: tape or a tiny baggie or envelope to store them

If you have a laminator, you can laminate later, but you don't need to. If you have no cardstock, plain printer paper works for a while. The only requirement is that the tiles survive being moved around.

The size matters more than the beauty. Aim for rectangles about the size of a postage stamp to a small domino. Big enough that little fingers can pick them up, small enough that you can build several words in a row.

If you are making tiles for a child who crumples paper when they're thinking, go thicker. Cereal-box cardboard is surprisingly perfect.

How many tiles to make (and why you should not make all of them today)

This is where parents tend to overdo it.

You read that English has lots of phonograms and lots of options, and you feel like you need to build a complete tile library before you can begin. You don’t. In fact, starting small is part of what makes the method feel calm.

Think back to the first scripted lesson in Chapter 2. You used ship, shop, chop, thin. You did not need a hundred tiles. You needed a handful of letters and a few teams.

So start with what you can use right away, then add as you go.

A good starter set for early lessons:

Consonants: b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y, z
Vowels: a, e, i, o, u
Common teams: sh, ch, th, wh, ng

If you want one extra team that shows up constantly, add ck. It will save you time later.

Make two or three copies of the most-used letters, especially s, t, p, n, m, r, l. You don’t need five of everything, but you do want enough that you can build simple words without running out. If you try to build “miss” and you only made one s, you’ll end up breaking the flow to hunt for a pen, and flow matters.

For vowels, make extra copies too. Many short words are built around the same few vowels. It’s frustrating to stop mid-lesson because you only made one a.

How to make red vowels and blue consonants without turning it into an art project

If you have red and blue markers, this is easy. Write vowel spellings in red and consonant spellings in blue.

If you only have one marker, you can still make it work:

Write everything in black, then put a small red dot in the corner of vowel tiles and a small blue dot in the corner of consonant tiles.

Or, underline vowels with a red line and consonants with a blue line, but

keep it quick.

The point is not that your child becomes obsessed with color. The point is that their eyes get used to the idea that vowels and consonants play different roles, and that the vowel sound is the engine. In the last section, you saw how quickly that becomes visible in ship versus shop: same blue frame, different red tile.

Keep your tile labels simple. Use lowercase print for single letters because that's what children see most often in books. For teams like sh, write them as two letters together on one tile, not as separate s and h. The reason is sound. In ship, /sh/ is one sound, so it deserves one tile. This is the same logic as tapping: sounds, not letters, run the show.

A small but important rule: one sound per tile

You will be tempted, especially with teams, to treat tiles as "two letters that happen to be together." Resist that.

In this method, tiles represent sound-spellings. That is why you build sh as one piece. Not because it's cute, but because it keeps your child's thinking aligned with their tapping.

Ship is three taps: /sh/ /i/ /p/.
So ship should be three tiles: sh, i, p.

That tight match between tapping and building is what makes tiles powerful. Your child taps three sounds, then physically lays down three tiles. The brain feels the one-to-one mapping.

If you separate sh into s and h, you're quietly teaching a different message: "This word has four pieces," which clashes with what your child just tapped. That clash can create confusion, especially for kids who already feel wobbly.

So yes, keep teams together.

A quick note about letter names

When you build with tiles, you will hear your child say things like "ess, aitch, eye." That's normal. School trains letter names early.

But your routine is sound-first. So you gently keep pulling them back toward sound language.

Child: "I need an ess."

Parent: “Yes, that letter is s. What sound does it make?”
Child: “/s/.”
Parent: “Good. Put /s/ first.”

You’re not banning letter names. You’re making sure they don’t replace sounds. Sounds lead. Letters follow.

How to store tiles so they don’t ruin your life

If tiles live loose in a drawer, they will become confetti.

Choose one storage method that is easy and boring:

A sandwich bag for consonants and a sandwich bag for vowels
An envelope labeled “Tiles”
A small photo box or pencil pouch
A divided container if you already have one, but don’t buy one for this

If you have a child who gets overwhelmed by too many choices, keep only the tiles you need for today’s lesson in a small working pile and leave the rest put away. Too many tiles on the table can turn BUILD into scavenger hunt time, which feels like school in the worst way.

You can even do what many families do: keep the whole set in a bag, but pull out a “today pile” before your child sits down. That takes about thirty seconds and saves five minutes of distraction.

How to use paper tiles inside the five steps (and keep the routine consistent)

Tiles belong in BUILD. Not in HEAR, SAY, or TAP, and not as a replacement for WRITE.

That order matters.

Here’s what it looks like in real life with a word you already know, and notice how little talking you need.

Parent: “Word is jump.” (HEAR)
Child: “Jump.” (SAY)
Parent: “Tap it.” (TAP)
Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/.”
Parent: “Build it.” (BUILD)

Now your child lays down j, u, m, p. You can point at each tile and have them say the sound as they place it, especially if they tend to drop

middle sounds.

Parent: “Say the sounds as you place them.”
Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/.”

Then you do the move that keeps tiles from turning into copying: you clear or cover the word before writing.

Parent: “Sweep it back. Tap it again. Now write jump.” (WRITE)

This is where parents sometimes feel tempted to skip the clear step because it seems inefficient. But clearing is the difference between “my child can build with help” and “my child can recall and write.”

Tiles are practice. Writing is the check.

If your child complains, “But I already made it,” you can say, “Yes, you built it. Now we’re going to see if your brain can pull it out without looking. That’s how it sticks.”

What to do when a child builds the wrong word

This is not a disaster. It’s one of the best parts of tiles.

If your child builds sop when you said shop, you do not swoop in with the right spelling. You return to sound, exactly like you did in tapping.

Parent: “Let’s check the first sound. Say the word.”
Child: “Shop.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/sh/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “Good. What tile spells /sh/?”
Child: “Sh.”
Parent: “Swap it in.”

This is why tiles lower the emotional cost. The child doesn’t have to erase a messy page. They simply swap one piece and keep going. The correction feels like adjusting, not failing.

If you want an even calmer move, build the contrast beside it, especially for common confusions like thin/fin or ship/sip.

Parent: “Build fin.”
Child: (builds fin)
Parent: “Now build thin next to it.”
Child: (builds thin)

Parent: “What changed?”
Child: “The first sound.”

Now the child can see and feel the difference. Again: process, not punishment.

How tiles help when handwriting is the real problem

Some children can hear sounds beautifully and choose spellings correctly, but their handwriting makes spelling practice miserable. Their hand is slow. They press hard. They erase holes in the paper. By the time they finish writing the word, they’ve forgotten the point.

Tiles let you separate spelling from handwriting, while still keeping writing in the routine.

You still WRITE, because writing is the goal, but you reduce the number of times your child has to write a word during practice.

Instead of writing a word five times, you can build it two or three times, then write it once from recall.

This is one of the quiet ways sound-first makes home practice doable. Your child can get many correct mapping repetitions without the physical fatigue.

A simple “tile first” ratio that works for many kids is this:

For each word, build it once, clear it, build it again, clear it, then write it once.

That gives you multiple sound-to-spelling connections with only one handwriting moment.

How to add new tiles without derailing the lesson

Eventually, you will say a word and realize you don’t have a tile you need. This will happen constantly as your word lists grow. It’s not a sign you failed to prepare. It’s a normal part of building a code.

When it happens, keep it quick and matter-of-fact.

Parent: “We need the tile for /ch/. We don’t have it yet. Let’s make it.”

Write ch on a small scrap, color it blue if you’re using color, cut it quickly, and keep going.

If your child loves being involved, let them write the tile. If they get perfectionistic about letter formation, you write it and move on. Remember: the tile is a tool, not a handwriting lesson.

Over time, your tile set grows naturally, connected to words your child has actually built. That makes the tiles meaningful. They are not random pieces in a box. They are familiar spellings your child has used.

And that familiarity is the whole point.

Tiles are not the end goal. They are the bridge.

They help your child do what Chapter 3 trained their ear to do: hear sounds in order.

Now the child gets to do what strong spellers do next: choose spellings for those sounds, with hands that can move pieces before they ever move a pencil.

Then, when the pencil finally comes out, it’s not to guess.

It’s to record something your child already knows how to build.

At some point, every family who uses paper tiles runs into a very practical problem.

The tiles migrate.

They end up under the couch. They get folded into “tiny paper airplanes.” They disappear into a sibling’s dollhouse like they were always meant to be furniture. Or, if you’re very lucky, they stay in the baggie but your child still manages to spill the whole bag onto the floor with one dramatic sweep of an elbow.

None of that is a reason to quit. It’s just real life.

This is where digital tiles can be a quiet gift. Not because screens are magical, and not because kids need more technology, but because digital tiles solve a few friction points that can derail an otherwise solid routine.

No pieces to lose.
No tiles to cut.
No scrambling when you realize you don’t have a ch tile.
No “I can’t find the m.”
And, for some children, less emotional weight than pencil-and-paper,

because a wrong move can be undone with a click instead of an eraser mark that feels permanent.

If you've been following the method, notice what we are not changing.

We are not changing the five steps.
We are not skipping tapping.
We are not turning spelling into a game where the computer does the thinking.

Digital tiles are still BUILD. They are simply a different way to do BUILD.

The method stays the same: HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

That last step, WRITE, still matters. Digital tiles are a bridge, not the destination. The destination is your child being able to write words in real life, from sound, without you or a screen providing the spelling.

So think of digital tiles like this: same training wheels, different bike.

How to keep digital tiles sound-first (so the screen doesn't steal the lesson)

A screen can accidentally pull you back into the old model: eyes first, sound second. If the word is visible on the device, or if the app prompts your child with letter hints before they have segmented the word, your child can start building by sight and guessing. That feels productive, but it is the same fragile learning we're trying to leave behind.

So you, the parent, keep the routine honest.

You say the word out loud first.
Your child repeats it.
Your child taps the sounds.
Only then do you open the tile board and build.

If you want a simple house rule that works beautifully here, borrow the line you've already practiced: "Pencil stays down until the sounds are out." Then extend it without making it dramatic: "And tiles stay still until the sounds are out."

It can sound like this:

Parent: "Word is shop."
Child: "Shop."
Parent: "Tap it."

Child: “/sh/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “Good. Now build it on the screen.”

The screen becomes a workspace, not a source of answers.

Why digital tiles can help certain children more than paper tiles

You’ve probably already noticed that children don’t resist the same parts of spelling.

Some children resist the pencil because handwriting is tiring or slow.
Some children resist the tapping because it feels slow and they want to rush.
Some children resist the tiles because they hate searching through a pile.

Digital tiles help most with that last group: the children who actually like building words, but get derailed by the physical management of pieces.

A digital board removes the scavenger hunt. The child can focus on sound-to-spelling decisions instead of “Where did the th go?”

Digital tiles can also help children who get perfectionistic about neatness. With paper tiles, the spacing can look messy, or the tiles can drift. With writing, erasures feel like failure. On a screen, the word can be rearranged cleanly without leaving a record of every wrong attempt. For an anxious child, that can keep the emotional temperature low enough for learning to happen.

And for families who are stretched thin, digital tiles reduce prep. If your evenings are chaotic, you can still do a clean BUILD step without cutting anything.

Now, a caution that matters: digital tiles can be too easy to click.

A child can move tiles around quickly without actually anchoring sounds. That is why you keep TAP in front of it. Tapping slows the process in the right way, so the screen doesn’t speed it up in the wrong way.

A simple digital-tile routine that matches everything you’ve built so far

Let’s take the exact words you used earlier, because continuity matters to a child’s brain.

Ship, shop, chop, thin.

You can do this on a tablet, a laptop, or whatever device you use for the

digital tiles. (The specific platform doesn’t matter here as much as the routine.)

Parent: “We’re doing four words. Same steps.”
Child: “Okay.”

Word 1: ship

Parent: “Word is ship.” (HEAR)
Child: “Ship.” (SAY)
Parent: “Tap it.” (TAP)
Child: “/sh/ /i/ /p/.”
Parent: “How many sounds?”
Child: “Three.”
Parent: “Good. Build it.” (BUILD)

Your child drags or clicks sh, i, p into place.

Parent: “Point to each tile and say the sound as you read it.”
Child: “/sh/ /i/ /p/… ship.”

Now you protect the recall step, just like you did with paper tiles.

Parent: “Clear the board.”
Child: (clears)
Parent: “Tap it again.”
Child: “/sh/ /i/ /p/.”
Parent: “Now write ship.” (WRITE)

Yes, even though you used a screen, you still end with pencil. If you are in a season where handwriting is truly the bottleneck, you can write fewer words, not skip writing entirely. Build three words, write one. But keep writing present, because it’s the transfer point.

Word 2: shop

Parent: “Word is shop.”
Child: “Shop.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/sh/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Word 3: chop

Parent: “Word is chop.”
Child: “Chop.”

Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/ch/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Word 4: thin

Parent: “Word is thin.”
Child: “Thin.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/th/ /i/ /n/.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Then clear and write thin.

This is the same lesson you already did. Same sound-first sequence. Same upstream correction if needed. The only difference is the surface you build on.

How to correct mistakes on a screen without turning it into “click until it looks right”

On paper, the correction temptation is to point at the word and say, “No, look.” On a screen, the temptation becomes, “Just try another one.” Both can drift into guessing.

So you correct exactly the way you’ve practiced since Chapter 2: back to sound, back to taps, then rebuild with intention.

If your child builds sop when you said shop:

Parent: “Say the word again.”
Child: “Shop.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/sh/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “What’s the first sound?”
Child: “/sh/.”
Parent: “What tile spells /sh/?”
Child: “sh.”
Parent: “Swap it in.”

You are teaching your child to use sound to drive the change, not visual discomfort or trial-and-error. The screen makes swapping quick. Your routine makes swapping meaningful.

If your child builds fin when you said thin:

Parent: “Listen. Thin.” (and you exaggerate it slightly)
Child: “Thin.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/th/ /i/ /n/.”
Parent: “Good. Now build it.”

You are still using SAY and TAP as your early warning system. The screen doesn’t change that. It just makes the build step smoother.

Interactive practice that still builds real spelling skill

Some digital tools include games, timed challenges, and scoring. Those can be motivating for certain kids, especially the ones who love competition or love beating their own time. The danger is when the score becomes the goal and the steps disappear.

So here is a simple filter you can use as a parent:

If the game rewards speed more than accuracy, use it sparingly.
If the game allows your child to guess letters without tapping sounds first, you provide the tapping.
If the game gives the word in print before your child has heard and segmented it, you cover the print and run HEAR, SAY, TAP yourself.

You can still use the fun part. You just keep the sound-first spine.

Here’s one way to do it that works well for many families:

You run a five-minute lesson with you in charge.
Then your child gets five minutes of a digital spelling game as “extra practice,” but the rule is: they must tap the word before they build it or type it.

Yes, they will try to skip tapping.
You will calmly enforce it.
And after a week or two, you may notice something encouraging: they begin tapping automatically, even when you’re not prompting, because tapping becomes the shortest path to being right.

That’s the whole point. We want the strategy to become the habit.

A digital version of the “Switch It” game

Earlier, you used minimal pairs like ship/sip and thin/fin to sharpen hearing. Digital tiles make that even easier because your child can keep most of the word and swap one tile.

You can say:

Parent: “Build ship.”
Child: (builds ship)
Parent: “Now change it to shop by changing only the vowel tile.”
Child: (swaps i to o)
Parent: “Now change shop to chop by changing only the first tile.”
Child: (swaps sh to ch)
Parent: “Now change chop to chip by changing only the middle tile.”
Child: (swaps o to i)

This is powerful because it teaches controlled changes and highlights exactly what orthographic mapping loves: contrast.

It also quietly trains your child to look for what stayed the same and what changed, which is a skill they will use later when you introduce suffix rules like Double, Drop, Change. If your child already thinks, “I can keep most of the word and adjust one part,” suffixing will feel less like chaos.

How to handle the “I want to do it myself” screen dynamic

Screens can trigger independence battles: “Let me,” “Stop telling me,” “I know.” That’s normal. And it doesn’t mean digital tiles are a bad idea.

Just make the roles clear.

The child controls the mouse or the touch screen.
You control the steps.

You can say, calmly: “You’re the builder. I’m the coach. Builders don’t skip steps.”

If your child starts dragging tiles before tapping, you don’t argue about it. You simply pause the build.

Parent: “Freeze. Tap first.”
Child: (groans)
Parent: “Three taps. Then you can build.”

Keep it short. Keep it predictable. The predictability is what reduces arguing over time.

The same principle applies if your child wants the device but not the writing. If they build perfectly and then refuse to write, you have options that preserve progress without turning it into a war.

Option 1: “Write one word today.”
Option 2: “Finger-write it on the table.”
Option 3: “Write it on a whiteboard.”
Option 4: “You write it once, I write it once.” (Yes, even for older kids. Shared work lowers pressure.)

But keep a small WRITE step present. The goal is always transfer.

Digital tiles are not a replacement for you

This matters enough to say plainly: the technology does not teach the method. You do.

The value of this approach has never been the materials. It has been the sequence and the sound-first attention. Digital tiles can make the build step smoother and the practice more frequent, especially for busy families. They can add fun repetition without extra paper. They can remove friction that causes fights.

But the reason your child improves will still be the same reason it improved with paper tiles: you insisted on the steps. You made the word a sound object first. You made your child segment it. You made spelling a match, not a guess.

So if paper tiles are working in your house, keep using them.
If paper tiles are constantly disappearing, go digital without guilt.
If your child thrives on a screen, use that motivation wisely.
If screens are a problem in your family, stay analog and simple.

Two roads, both good. The method stays the method.

And no matter what tools you use, keep the promise you made back in Chapter 2, the one that protects mapping better than any app ever will:

Pencil stays down until the sounds are out.

Chapter 5: The 74 Keys: Unlocking English with Phonograms

By now, your kitchen table has a new rhythm.

You say the word. Your child says it back. They tap the sounds. They build with tiles, swapping pieces instead of erasing holes in the paper. Then, at the very end, they write the word from recall. Pencil stays down until the sounds are out.

That routine has already done something big: it has moved spelling out of the “try hard and hope” category and into the “do the steps” category.

But if you’ve been doing this for even a short time, you’ve probably felt the next pressure point creeping in.

It shows up in little moments like these:

Your child taps /sh/ /i/ /p/ and builds ship easily. Great.

Then you say, “Word is rain.”

They tap: /r/ /ai/ /n/.

They reach for tiles, and you realize you have a problem. Not a motivation problem. A code problem.

Because now you have to answer a real question: what spells the /ai/ sound?

Is it ai like rain?
Is it ay like play?
Is it a_e like cake?
Is it a like apron?

And if you’ve ever been taught (or taught your child) that English is basically “whatever, just memorize it,” this is the moment where the old dread tries to come back. The moment where parents start giving hints like “It’s the one with two vowels” or “Remember this is a Tuesday word” or “It’s the way it looks.”

This chapter is where we replace that dread with a tool.

Not a trick. Not a list. A tool.

The tool is the phonogram.

A phonogram is a sound-spelling.

That’s it, in parent language.

A phonogram is the way English writes a sound.

Sometimes it is one letter that spells one sound, like m for /m/.

Sometimes it is two letters working together to spell one sound, like sh for /sh/ or ch for /ch/. You have already been using these as tiles, and if you think back to Chapter 3, you can hear why they belong together. Ship has three taps: /sh/ /i/ /p/. So it needs three sound pieces. Sh is one sound. One tile.

Sometimes a phonogram is more than two letters, like igh in night.

And sometimes a phonogram can spell more than one sound, depending on the word. That part is what makes parents nervous, so let’s say it clearly, early, and calmly.

A phonogram is not a rule. It is not a guarantee. It is an option in the code.

The phonogram is the key on the key ring. The rules in later chapters will tell you when that key is likely to fit. But right now, the first job is to show your child that English does not require infinite guessing. It has a finite set of common sound-spellings that show up again and again.

When you teach those sound-spellings directly, you give your child something better than “try it and see.” You give them a menu of real options.

This is the moment where many parents realize why the tiles worked so well.

Tiles were never about plastic or paper. They were about taking spelling out of the air.

A phonogram does the same thing, but more broadly. It names the building blocks you and your child have been handling without always having language for them.

You can hear it in the way parents naturally talk during BUILD.

“What can spell /sh/? Oh, s-h.”
“What can spell /ch/? Oh, c-h.”
“Short i is i.”

That last line is important. When you say “short i is i,” you are already thinking in phonograms. You’re saying, “This sound is represented by this spelling.”

A phonogram just makes that idea explicit and reusable.

So instead of treating each word as a separate emergency, you start collecting keys.

And here is the best news: you do not need hundreds of keys to unlock most of English.

This book uses a set of 74 basic phonograms, a practical collection of the most common sound-spellings in English. Not because 74 is magical, but because it’s manageable. It’s small enough to actually learn at home, and large enough to do real work.

You already know several of them.

s, m, t, p, n are phonograms.
a, e, i, o, u are phonograms.
sh, ch, th, wh, ng, ck are phonograms.

Notice what that list does to your child’s confidence. It turns spelling into, “I already have some of the keys.”

Now let’s make one thing crystal clear, because this is where families sometimes get tangled.

A phonogram is not the same as “a letter.”

Letters are symbols. Phonograms are symbols tied to sound.

Sometimes those match neatly, like p spells /p/. That feels easy.

But English isn’t built only on one-letter sound matches. English uses teams constantly, and it uses them on purpose. When your child learns phonograms, they stop reacting to teams like they’re weird exceptions. They start seeing them as normal parts of the code.

This is exactly why, back in Chapter 4, we insisted on one sound per tile. That wasn’t just a teaching preference. It was you quietly training your

child to think in phonograms.

When your child builds ship with sh-i-p, they are building with phonograms.

When your child builds thin with th-i-n, they are building with phonograms.

The word phonogram might sound formal, but the idea is kitchen-table simple: “This chunk of letters is doing one sound job.”

That language matters even more when you move into vowel teams, because vowels are where children run out of confidence first.

A child can often manage consonants by feel, but vowels feel slippery. Short vowels, long vowels, teams, silent e, odd spellings in common words. It can feel like a swamp.

Phonograms put stepping stones in the swamp.

When your child knows that /ai/ can be spelled ai and ay and a_e, they are no longer staring at a blank page. They have options.

And that changes everything about the emotional experience of spelling.

Instead of, “I don’t know,” your child can learn to say, “I hear /ai/. Which phonogram should we use?”

That sentence is the beginning of independence.

It also fits perfectly into the method you already have.

HEAR: “The word is rain.”
SAY: “Rain.”
TAP: /r/ /ai/ /n/.
BUILD: “We need a phonogram for /ai/.”
WRITE: “Now write rain.”

Phonograms slide into BUILD like they were made for it, because they were.

Now, you might be wondering how this is different from “phonics,” or why your child can read but still needs this.

Phonics is the broader skill of connecting sounds to letters and using those connections to read and spell.

Phonograms are the specific spellings that represent sounds.

Here’s a helpful way to think about it.

Phonics is the ability to use the code.
Phonograms are the keys that make up the code.

A child can sometimes learn to read with partial keys, especially if they’re a strong guesser, a strong memorizer, or they use context well. Reading allows for recognition and correction. If a guess doesn’t make sense, the sentence helps.

Spelling is less forgiving. Spelling asks for recall. It asks the child to choose a spelling with no model in front of them. That is why, as you saw in Chapter 3, a child can read fine but spell terribly. Their sound awareness may be good enough to recognize words they’ve seen, but their key ring is incomplete when it’s time to produce the spelling.

Phonograms fill in that key ring.

This is also why phonograms are not “sight words versus phonics,” as if those were two competing religions. Phonograms include the spellings that make so-called sight words make sense.

Even a word that feels tricky often becomes less mysterious when you stop treating it like a picture and start treating it like sound plus spelling choices.

Take the word have, which we’ll make sense of later when we talk about rules like “English words don’t end in v” and the jobs of silent e. For now, just notice something: have is built from sounds. /h/ /a/ /v/. Those sounds need spellings. The word doesn’t become less sound-based just because it has a rule attached to it. The rule is layered on top of the sound mapping, not a replacement for it.

That layered idea is going to matter throughout this chapter and the next ones.

Sound first.
Then spelling choices.
Then rules and patterns.
Later, for older kids, meaning and word families.

Phonograms sit right in the middle of that sequence. They are the bridge between “I can hear the sounds” and “I can choose spellings without

guessing.”

If you want to introduce the word phonogram to your child without making it feel like a vocabulary quiz, keep it plain.

You can say, “A phonogram is a spelling that stands for a sound. Like sh says /sh/. Like th says /th/. Like ai can say /ai/.”

Or, if your child is the type to groan at new terms, you can keep the term mostly for yourself and just use the idea.

“What can spell that sound?”
“Which spelling says /ai/?”
“Do we need a team here?”

You’ll notice we’ve already been talking that way.

So why bother naming it at all?

Because naming it gives you a handle for the next phase.

Right now, you have tiles, and you’ve built a handful of teams as single sound tiles. Chapter 5 is where your tile pile becomes organized. It’s where you stop inventing spellings word by word and start building from a known set.

It is also where your child begins to experience a quiet, powerful shift: the code is learnable.

Not infinite.
Not random.
Not “just memorize.”

Learnable.

And learnable is what creates hope in a child who has decided they are “bad at spelling.”

So here is the promise of phonograms, stated as simply as possible.

A phonogram is a common spelling for a sound.
English uses the same sound-spellings again and again.
If your child learns the most common ones, spelling stops feeling like a weekly ambush.

Your child will still have to practice. You will still use the five steps. You

will still tap before pencil, and you will still clear the tiles before writing so recall gets trained.

But now, when your child taps /r/ /ai/ /n/ and looks up at you, you won't have to rescue them with "It's the one that looks right."

You can say, calmly, like a coach handing over a tool, "That /ai/ sound has a few phonograms. Let's choose one."

And your child will start to believe, for good reason, that spelling is not something you either have or you don't.

It's something you can build.

If phonograms are keys, then this section is where you pick up the key ring and start learning what's actually on it.

Not by staring at a chart and trying to memorize 74 items in one heroic weekend. Not by testing your child on flashcards until everyone is cranky. We're going to do it the Sound First way: useful first, small sets, practiced inside real words, always tied back to HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

A guided tour means two things here.

First, you're going to see the main categories of sound-spellings your child will use constantly, so the code starts to feel organized instead of endless.

Second, you're going to get a parent-friendly way to talk about them at the table. Not linguistics. Not technical labels. Just the kind of simple language that helps your child choose a spelling on purpose during BUILD.

Start with what you already have: single-letter consonant phonograms

You already know how to do these because you've been doing them since ship, shop, and jump. Most consonant sounds are spelled by one letter most of the time: m says /m/, p says /p/, t says /t/, n says /n/.

This matters because when spelling feels shaky, parents sometimes rush past the basics and assume the child only needs "the tricky stuff." But strong spelling is built on fast, automatic basics. When the consonant phonograms are instant, your child has more working memory left for the hard part, which is usually the vowel choice.

So your first mental category is: one-letter consonants that usually say

one sound. These are your dependable keys. They get you through a huge percentage of words.

Then come consonant teams: one sound, two (or more) letters

You've met the most important ones already because tapping forced you to hear them as one sound.

sh as in ship
ch as in chop
th as in thin
wh as in when
ng as in sing
ck as in back

Remember the rule you established with tiles: one sound per tile. That rule wasn't about convenience. It was about keeping your child's sound map clean.

If ship is three taps, then it is three sound pieces. That is why sh belongs on one tile and why your child stops thinking "four letters, four jobs." They start thinking "three sounds, three jobs."

At the table, this category sounds like:

Parent: "What's the first sound?"
Child: "/sh/."
Parent: "Good. That sound has a phonogram: sh."

Or, if your child hates the word phonogram:

Parent: "What can spell /sh/?"
Child: "sh."

Notice what you're doing: you're not treating teams as exceptions. You're treating them as normal keys.

Now we get to the category that creates most of the drama: vowels

Consonants are fairly steady. Vowels are the engine, and engines come with options.

In earlier chapters you used red tiles for vowels because the vowel sound spot matters. Now you're going to expand what "a vowel tile" can be. Sometimes it's one letter. Sometimes it's a team. Sometimes it's a pattern with silent e. Your child doesn't need all of that today. But they do

need the idea that the red spot can be spelled in more than one way, and that this is not chaos. It’s the code.

Start with the simple vowel phonograms

The short vowels are your starter set: a, e, i, o, u.

This is where you keep your language sound-first. You don’t want your child thinking the vowel is named “short a” as if that’s a thing you must memorize. You want them thinking: “I hear /a/ like in cat. The common spelling is a.”

At the table, you can keep it clean:

Parent: “Word is map.”
Child: “Map.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/m/ /a/ /p/.”
Parent: “What’s the vowel sound?”
Child: “/a/.”
Parent: “Good. The phonogram for that sound is usually a.”

Then build and write, as always.

The long vowels and their most common spellings

This is where families often get told unhelpful things like “When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking,” which works just enough times to be tempting and fails just enough times to create more confusion.

Sound First will do something more stable: we will treat long vowel sounds as sounds with several common phonograms, and we will learn them in a practical order.

Here’s the parent-friendly tour. This is not the full list of every possibility, and it doesn’t need to be. It’s the core set you’ll use constantly.

Long A, /ai/
Common phonograms: a_e as in cake, ai as in rain, ay as in play

Long E, /ee/
Common phonograms: ee as in feet, ea as in eat, e as in he, y as in happy

Long I, /igh/ or /ie/ depending on the word
Common phonograms: i_e as in bike, igh as in night, y as in my

Long O, /oe/
Common phonograms: o_e as in home, oa as in boat, ow as in slow

Long U, /yoo/ or /oo/ (you'll hear both in English)
Common phonograms: u_e as in cube, ue as in cue, ew as in few

You do not need to teach all of those at once. But you, the parent, should see what's happening: the code is not "anything goes." The code is "a handful of common spellings show up again and again."

And this is exactly where your five-step routine protects your child from overwhelm.

When your child taps rain as /r/ /ai/ /n/, they are not being asked to recall a visual picture. They are being asked to choose a phonogram for a sound. That's a much smaller, more solvable job.

Parent: "We need the /ai/ sound. We have a few keys. Let's try ai today: r-ai-n."

If your child asks, "How do I know which one?" you don't panic and you don't say, "You just have to remember." You say the truest thing at this stage:

Parent: "Some words use one spelling, some use another. We'll learn patterns and rules that help us choose. For today, I'm going to tell you which key this word uses, and you're going to build it and write it."

That is not cheating. That is teaching. You are building the key ring.

Vowel teams that kids meet early and often

There are a few vowel teams that are so common they deserve early attention because they show up in everyday books and everyday writing.

ai as in rain
ay as in play
ee as in feet
ea as in eat (and later you'll learn it can also say /e/ as in bread)
oa as in boat
ow as in slow (and later /ou/ as in cow)
igh as in night
oo as in moon (and /uu/ as in book)
ar as in car
or as in for

er, ir, ur as in her, bird, turn

That last group is worth pausing on because it’s a moment where parents often feel the “exceptions” story trying to creep back in.

Your child will notice that her, bird, and turn have the same vowel sound. And they’re right. The sound is similar, and it has multiple spellings. That’s not proof that English is broken. It’s proof that English is layered, and your job is to make the layers learnable.

At the table, this becomes wonderfully simple:

Parent: “You hear the /er/ sound. That sound has a few spellings. Today, in this word, it’s spelled ir.”

No drama. Just a key choice.

The silent-e pattern as a phonogram family, not a random trick

You have already hinted at this in Chapter 4 when you said sometimes the red vowel tile is a pattern like a_e in cake. Later, Chapter 6 will give you the “jobs” of silent e and make it make deep sense. But you can begin now with the most common job: silent e helps a vowel say its name (its long sound).

Not as a chant. As a buildable pattern.

Tap: /c/ /ai/ /k/
Build: c a_e k

This is one place tiles shine because your child can literally see the vowel spot change from one tile to a pattern.

cap: c a p
cape: c a_e p

Same consonant frame, upgraded vowel spelling. That is controlled change again, the same idea you practiced with ship and shop, now applied to vowel decisions.

If your child asks why the e isn’t pronounced, you can say, “It’s there to help the vowel. It’s doing a job even though it’s quiet.” Then move on. Chapter 6 will give you the full, satisfying explanation. Right now we’re collecting keys.

Two-letter consonant phonograms that matter for spelling choices

Some consonant sounds also have multiple spellings, and you'll meet them as you move beyond beginner words. Here are a few you'll see early:

/k/ can be c, k, ck (and later, more options)
/j/ can be j, g (as in giant)
/f/ can be f, ff, ph (as in phone)
/v/ is almost always v, but English words don't end in v, which is why have exists (you will love Chapter 6 for this)
/z/ can be z, zz, s (as in is)

You don't need to explain all of that at once. But you can start talking like a person who knows there is a system coming.

Parent: "We need /k/. We can spell /k/ a few ways. Today we'll use c."

This keeps your child from assuming there is one right letter for every sound and feeling betrayed later. You're gently telling the truth: sounds can have more than one spelling, and we will learn how to choose.

A quick reality check: the point is not to memorize 74 keys in isolation

If you try to "tour" all 74 phonograms like a museum visit where you stare at each one for ten seconds, your child will forget most of them, and you'll feel like you failed.

Instead, think of this tour as you learning the layout of the city.

There are consonant streets that are straightforward.
There are vowel highways with multiple exits.
There are a few intersections that are famous for confusion.

Your daily practice will be how your child learns the city: by traveling through it in real words, with sound leading every time.

So here is how this guided tour shows up in tomorrow's lesson, in real kitchen-table language:

Parent: "Word is rain."
Child: "Rain."
Parent: "Tap it."
Child: "/r/ /ai/ /n/."
Parent: "Good. That /ai/ sound can be spelled a few ways. Today we're using ai. Build it."
Child: (builds r-ai-n)

Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write rain.”

That’s it. No worksheet on vowel teams. No lecture on “two vowels walking.” Just a key used in a real lock.

In the next section of this chapter, we’re going to turn this tour into an actual practice plan you can live with: which keys to introduce first, how to cycle them so they stick, and how to keep your five steps intact while your child’s key ring grows.

Because the goal is not that your child can recite phonograms.

The goal is that when your child hears a sound, they can reach for a spelling option with confidence instead of guessing.

That’s what keys are for.

By now you can feel the pull in two directions.

On one side, you have momentum. The five steps are working. Your child is tapping before pencil. Tiles are keeping things calm. You’re no longer staring at a list like it’s a weekly storm system.

On the other side, you have a real-life question: “How do I practice these phonograms without turning my home into a flashcard factory?”

Because the moment you hear “74 phonograms,” your parent brain can do one of two unhelpful things.

It can panic and try to teach everything at once.

Or it can avoid it altogether and keep limping along word by word, hoping the right spellings somehow stick by accident.

We’re going to do a third thing: build a schedule that fits a real family and keeps the method intact.

A schedule that works has three qualities:

It is small enough to be consistent.
It is structured enough to create repetition.
It is flexible enough to match your child’s needs without becoming a full-time job.

And it never breaks the spine of the method. Phonograms live inside BUILD. They do not replace HEAR, SAY, TAP, and they do not turn spelling

into looking at charts.

Here is the most important mindset shift before we get practical:

You are not “teaching 74 phonograms.”

You are building a usable key ring.

Keys go on the ring because you use them. They get polished because you use them again. You do not memorize keys to prove you own them. You carry keys so you can open doors.

So instead of a big, heroic phonogram unit, you’re going to do two tracks at once.

Track one: teach a tiny set of phonograms explicitly.
Track two: use them immediately in real words through the five steps.

That is what makes them stick.

The simplest schedule: the 15-minute loop

If you want one routine you can run on autopilot, use this structure three to five days a week:

Minute 1 to 2: Quick review of known phonograms (sound to spelling, not letter names).
Minute 3 to 10: Word building with the five steps (4 to 8 words, depending on your child).
Minute 11 to 13: A short “switch it” chain using tiles (change one sound at a time).
Minute 14 to 15: One sentence for dictation using one or two of the words (optional, but powerful for older kids).

If that sounds like too much, cut the last two pieces. Keep the core: review plus words.

If it sounds like not enough, resist the urge to add minutes. Add days. Frequency beats duration.

Now let’s fill in what each part actually looks like, in kitchen-table language.

Part 1: Quick phonogram review that doesn’t become flashcard torture

This is where many programs lose families. Review becomes a

performance: “What does this say?” over and over, with a child who can feel the quiz vibes from across the room.

Sound First review is faster and calmer because you run it as a reflex check, not a test.

You show a phonogram tile or write it large: sh.
You ask, “What sound?”
Child: “/sh/.”

You show: ai.
You ask, “What sound?”
Child: “/ai/.”

If a phonogram has more than one sound, you do not demand a full recital every time. You treat it like a menu you’ll use when needed.

Parent: “This one can say more than one sound. Today, in our words, we’re using the /ee/ sound.”

The point of review is not to prove your child remembers everything. The point is to wake up the keys you’re about to use.

Keep it to 6 to 10 phonograms total. End while it’s still easy.

Part 2: Introduce new phonograms in small sets, but don’t isolate them

A good pace for many families is two new phonograms per week, sometimes three, sometimes one. The number matters less than the consistency and the immediate use.

The mistake to avoid is teaching a phonogram as an object to memorize without a job to do.

Instead, introduce it like this:

Parent: “Today we’re adding a new key. This spelling is ai. It says /ai/ like in rain.”

Then you use it right away in BUILD with a real word.

HEAR: “rain”
SAY: “rain”
TAP: /r/ /ai/ /n/
BUILD: “We need /ai/. Today we’re using ai.”
WRITE: rain

Your child doesn’t need a long explanation. The word is the explanation.

If you want a clean order that fits the way kids meet words, start with what you’ve already been using and expand outward:

Phase 1: Consonant teams and short vowels (sh, ch, th, wh, ng, ck; a, e, i, o, u)
Phase 2: The most common long vowel teams (ai, ay, ee, ea, oa, ow)
Phase 3: Silent-e patterns as a family (ae, ie, oe, ue, e_e when needed)
Phase 4: Common r-controlled patterns (ar, or, er, ir, ur)
Phase 5: Frequent “later” keys (igh, oo, ou, oy, au, aw, etc., as your child’s reading and writing demand them)

Notice what we’re doing. We are not trying to finish the list. We are trying to cover the spellings your child actually needs in real writing.

That is why a practice schedule that works is allowed to be uneven. If your child is writing stories about boats and snow, you’ll touch oa and ow sooner. If they’re in a season of animal books, you’ll hit ar and or quickly. The code is still the code. You’re just meeting it where life is handing it to you.

Part 3: Choose words that create clusters, not strangers

Back in Chapter 2 and 3, you didn’t do fifteen unrelated words. You did ship, shop, chop. You built a tiny family.

Do the same thing with phonograms.

If you’re practicing ai for /ai/, choose a small word set where ai is stable:

rain, pain, main, chain (if your child is ready for four sounds and a blend), train

If you’re practicing ay for /ai/, choose:

play, day, say, tray

Then, and this is important, contrast the phonograms after your child has success with each one.

Parent: “Listen: rain and day both have /ai/. They use different spellings. Rain uses ai. Day uses ay.”

You are planting the truth gently: the sound can have more than one

spelling. Your child is not betrayed by this later because you're teaching it as normal from the beginning.

Keep the sets short. Four to eight words is plenty. More words does not equal more mapping if your child's attention collapses.

Part 4: A simple weekly rhythm (so you don't have to reinvent the plan)

Here's a schedule you can run for months without burning out.

Day 1: Teach or re-teach one phonogram, then build 5 to 7 words using it.
Day 2: Review that phonogram plus a few old ones, then build 5 to 7 mixed words.
Day 3: Teach a second phonogram, then build words using it.
Day 4: Mix and contrast the two phonograms in word sets (rain, day, train, play).
Day 5 (optional): Light dictation day: a few words, then one or two sentences.

If you only do three days, do Day 1, Day 3, and Day 4. That gives you new learning plus contrast, which is where the brain starts sorting.

If you do five days, keep the fifth day short and confidence-building. Many families love making Friday the "easy win" day where the child gets to feel fluent.

Part 5: How to keep the five steps intact while phonograms expand

As the key ring grows, BUILD can get longer. Your child may pause and look up more often: "Which one is it?" That's not backsliding. That's the moment spelling becomes real decision-making.

Your job is to keep the decision-making sound-based, not guess-based.

So when your child taps /r/ /ai/ /n/ and asks, "Is it ai or ay?" you respond like a coach:

Parent: "Great question. Both can say /ai/. In this word, we use ai. Build it."

Later, when you've learned patterns, you'll add reasons. For now, you are building familiarity. A key becomes a key because you've used it in several locks.

Then, after building and before writing, keep doing the move that made everything honest back in Chapter 2: clear the tiles.

The word disappears. The brain retrieves it. That is where mapping strengthens.

If you skip that step, you can accidentally create a child who can build with tiles beautifully but cannot write from memory. Tiles are the bridge, not the destination.

Part 6: Troubleshooting the three most common schedule stalls

Stall 1: “My child can do the words in the lesson but forgets the phonogram later.”

That’s normal early on. It means you need shorter sets and more cycles, not a longer lesson.

Introduce fewer new phonograms.
Use them in more words across more days.
Keep review tight and daily.

Stall 2: “We keep missing days, and then I feel like we have to start over.”

You don’t. You just return to the loop.

On the first day back, review 6 phonograms, do 4 words you know your child can spell successfully, and stop. Your only job is to restart consistency. Mastery will come from the rhythm, not from punishment for missing Tuesday.

Stall 3: “My child is starting to guess again when there are multiple spellings.”

That’s your signal to slow BUILD down and tighten TAP.

Return upstream.

Parent: “Let’s tap it again. What is the vowel sound? Good. Here are the two keys that could work. Today I’ll tell you which one. Later you’ll learn patterns that help you choose.”

This keeps the emotional temperature low. Your child does not need to carry the whole code at once. They need to carry the next correct step.

A practice schedule that works is not measured by how many phonograms you covered. It’s measured by what your child can actually

use.

When your child hears /sh/ and reaches for sh without drama, that key is on the ring.

When your child hears /ai/ and can build rain with ai because they’ve built it before, that key is on the ring.

And when the week is messy, the baby is crying, the dinner is burning, and it’s still possible to do six minutes of HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE without a fight, that’s the real sign your schedule works.

Because the point was never to conquer a list.

It was to make English feel like a code your child can operate on purpose, one small cluster at a time.

Chapter 6: Rules, Not Exceptions: Making Sense of English

By now, you and your child have learned to treat English like a buildable code. You don't start with the pencil. You start with the word in the air. HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE. You've collected keys. You've learned that sh is one sound, one tile. You've learned that the red vowel spot is the engine, and that sometimes it's spelled with one letter and sometimes with a team.

And then a very normal thing happens.

You start feeling confident, and your child starts spelling more words correctly, and suddenly you hit a cluster of words that look like they are trying to pick a fight.

Why is it bell with two l's, but tell is also two l's, and then hotel is one l, and nobody warned you?

Why is miss two s's, but this is one s?

Why is puff two f's, but of is one f, and also what is that word even doing?

This is the moment where the old "English is random" story tries to crawl back onto the table.

Chapter 6 is where we stop that story at the door.

English does have oddities. English does have layers. English borrowed words and kept their spellings like little souvenirs.

But English is not a pile of exceptions. It is a system with foundations. When you learn a few of those foundations, a huge number of "mystery spellings" stop being mysterious. They become predictable.

That begins with one of the most parent-friendly rules you will ever teach, because you can see it, you can hear it, and your child can use it immediately.

The FLOSS rule.

Here it is in plain language:

In a one-syllable word, after a short vowel, we often double f, l, and s at the end.

That’s why the rule is called FLOSS. The doubled letters are f, l, s. (Many programs also include z, and you will see that too, like buzz. We’ll keep it simple for now: f, l, s are your first anchors.)

This rule is not about making words harder. It’s about making them more readable and consistent. It’s one of the ways English signals, “That vowel is short.”

Think about the words you already used earlier: ship, shop, chop, thin, jump. Those were clean, beginner-friendly words. Now you’re going to expand into words your child sees all the time in real writing: tell, miss, puff, off, hill, mess.

If your child has been trained by lists, they may treat each one like a separate picture to memorize.

But Sound First gives you a better option: you can teach your child to notice the short vowel and then expect the doubling pattern.

Here is what it can sound like at your kitchen table, with your same calm routine.

Parent: “Word is tell.”
Child: “Tell.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/t/ /e/ /l/.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Your child reaches for tiles: t, e, l.

And this is where the rule enters as a coach’s cue, not a lecture.

Parent: “Good. One syllable, short vowel. At the end, l is a FLOSS letter. We usually double it. Build it with two l tiles.”

Now your child builds t-e-l-l.

Then you do what you always do: clear it, tap it, write it.

Notice what just happened. You didn’t ask your child to memorize that tell is special. You gave them a reason for the spelling that will apply again and again. Next time you say sell, bell, fell, well, they have a framework. They still have to practice, but now they are practicing a pattern, not collecting isolated facts.

Parents often ask, “But how do I know when it’s a short vowel?”

You already have the tools for that, and you don’t have to make it complicated. Short vowels are the vowel sounds in words like cat, bed, fish, hop, sun. They are quick, open sounds. Your child doesn’t need to label them perfectly. They need to hear the vowel sound in the word and notice that it is the short sound, not the long sound.

This is where your red vowel habit from Chapter 4 pays off. When you build tell, the vowel is the red tile e. You can point to it and say, “That’s the vowel engine. It’s short here, so we expect the FLOSS pattern at the end.”

Now let’s make this even more useful by looking at what the FLOSS rule does not do, because that prevents confusion.

The FLOSS rule is for one-syllable words that end in f, l, or s after a short vowel.

That’s why we get:

off, cliff, stuff
well, tell, hill
miss, pass, mess

But we don’t double in words that don’t fit the conditions.

If the word has more than one syllable, the pattern changes. That’s why we can have a word like hotel with one l at the end. It doesn’t fit the one-syllable, short-vowel-at-the-end pattern. Later, when you get into syllables and suffix rules, you’ll learn the deeper logic of when doubling happens in longer words. For now, you can keep the promise of this chapter: foundations first, without drowning.

And we also don’t double every final consonant. Your child may notice that back doesn’t end in bb, and fish doesn’t end in shsh. That’s fine. FLOSS is a specific rule for specific letters. It gives your child certainty in a small zone, and small zones of certainty are how confidence grows.

Here’s a quick mini-lesson you can do in under five minutes that makes the rule feel real without making it feel like school.

Parent: “Today we’re going to learn a rule that makes spelling easier. It’s called FLOSS. Listen for the short vowel, then listen for the ending sound.”

Word 1: miss

Parent: “Word is miss.”
Child: “Miss.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/m/ /i/ /s/.”
Parent: “Build it.”
Child: (builds m-i-s)
Parent: “Short vowel, one syllable, ends in s. FLOSS says we usually double s. Add another s.”
Child: (adds s)
Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write miss.”

Word 2: hill

Parent: “Word is hill.”
Child: “Hill.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/h/ /i/ /l/.”
Parent: “Build it.”
Child: (builds h-i-l)
Parent: “Ends in l after a short vowel, one syllable. Double the l.”
Child: (adds l)
Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write hill.”

Word 3: off

Parent: “Word is off.”
Child: “Off.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/o/ /f/.”
Now you just learned something about your child’s segmentation. Many children will tap off as two sounds, /o/ /f/. That’s correct. Some will try to make it three because they’re thinking of letters. You stay sound-first.

Parent: “Two sounds. Good. Build it.”
Child: (builds o-f)
Parent: “One syllable, short vowel, ends in f. Double the f.”
Child: (adds f)
Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write off.”

That’s the whole lesson. Your child just used a rule to make a spelling decision without guessing. And because you cleared the tiles before writing, your child’s brain did the retrieval work that builds mapping.

Now, let’s widen the lens, because the title of this section is “The FLOSS

Rule and Other Foundations.” FLOSS is one foundation. Here are a few more that will start saving you time immediately, even before we get to silent e jobs and the “no word ends in v” moment later in this chapter.

Foundation 1: English protects the short vowel in one-syllable words

FLOSS is one way English does this. Another way is ck.

You introduced ck as a tile back in Chapter 4 as a helpful extra team, and now you get to explain why it exists without making it sound arbitrary.

In many one-syllable words, after a short vowel, the /k/ sound is often spelled ck at the end.

back, duck, sick, rock

You can teach this with the same structure as FLOSS.

Parent: “Word is back.”
Child: “Back.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/b/ /a/ /k/.”
Parent: “Build it.”
Child: (builds b-a-k)
Parent: “Short vowel, one syllable, ends with /k/. At the end after a short vowel, we often use ck. Swap in ck.”
Child: (swaps k for ck)
Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write back.”

Notice the pattern again: you are teaching your child that spelling choices are not random. They depend on position and sound context. That is the beginning of rule-based spelling, which is exactly what list-based spelling avoids.

Foundation 2: Some endings are there to signal, not to speak

This one prepares your child for the silent e chapter without you teaching all nine jobs yet.

You can say, simply, “Sometimes letters are quiet but still doing a job.”

You already used that language in Chapter 5 when you said silent e helps the vowel. You don’t need to go further here. Just keep the idea alive so your child doesn’t feel tricked later.

Foundation 3: We don’t fix spelling downstream anymore

This might be the most important foundation of all, because it keeps your tone calm and keeps your child from feeling constantly corrected.

When your child misspells a FLOSS word, you don’t circle it and sigh. You return upstream.

If your child writes mis for miss:

Parent: “Tap miss.”
Child: “/m/ /i/ /s/.”
Parent: “Short vowel, one syllable, ends in s. What does FLOSS tell us?”
Child: “Double it.”
Parent: “Good. Fix it.”

Now the correction is not personal. It’s procedural. It’s just, “We didn’t apply the foundation yet.”

And that, quietly, is the deep shift this chapter is bringing into your home. Rules are not extra information to memorize after the word is already wrong. Rules are decision tools used during BUILD, before the pencil moves.

One last note that will help you keep this friendly.

When you teach foundations like FLOSS, you are not asking your child to become a tiny grammar professor. You’re giving them a small, reliable lever. A way to say, “I know what to do here.”

Some children love rules immediately because rules feel like relief. Other children resist rules because rules feel like more to remember. For those children, keep your language simple and keep the repetition inside words.

Instead of “In a one-syllable word after a short vowel we double f, l, s,” you can say, “Short vowel, ending in f, l, or s: double it.”

Say it while they build. Say it while they write. Say it again tomorrow in a different word. Let it become a rhythm, the way “pencil stays down until the sounds are out” became a rhythm.

Because that’s how foundations become automatic. Not by explaining harder. By using them, calmly, in the same five-step routine your child already trusts.

And once FLOSS starts clicking, your child will begin to see what you see: English is not a pile of exceptions.

It’s a system that keeps its promises more often than anyone ever told them.

Silent e is one of the places where the “English is random” story has done the most damage.

Most of us were taught one thin version of the truth: “Silent e makes the vowel say its name.” Then we were handed a stack of words where that explanation seemed to work sometimes and fail other times, and the conclusion was obvious: English is full of exceptions.

But silent e is not a prank. It is a tool. And it does more than one job.

You already brushed against this in Chapter 5 when you built words like cape with a_e as a vowel pattern, and you said, “It’s there to help the vowel. It’s doing a job even though it’s quiet.” Now we’re going to make that sentence sturdy by giving you the full set of jobs.

Not because your child needs to memorize nine reasons today. Not because you’re going to quiz them like a tiny spelling lawyer. But because you, the parent, need to stop feeling like you’re guessing. When you know what silent e can do, you can coach your child calmly inside BUILD, the same way you coached FLOSS and ck.

Here is the big idea: silent e is not one rule. Silent e is a sign. It signals something about the word.

Sometimes it signals the vowel.
Sometimes it signals the consonant.
Sometimes it signals “this word is not the other word that looks like it.”
Sometimes it protects meaning.

Your job at the table is not to lecture about signals. Your job is to use the signal at the moment it matters, with the same upstream calm you’ve been practicing since “thin/fin.”

Let’s walk through the nine jobs in parent language, with examples you can actually use in lessons.

Job 1: Silent e makes the vowel say its name (the long vowel job)

This is the one you already know, and it is real.

cap becomes cape
kit becomes kite

hop becomes hope
tub becomes tube

Listen to what changes. The consonants stay. The vowel sound changes. That is why silent e is such a perfect match for the tile method you learned in Chapter 4. You can build the base word, then “upgrade the red spot.”

Here’s a quick scripted moment that fits your routine:

Parent: “Word is cap.”
Child: “Cap.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/k/ /a/ /p/.”
Parent: “Build it.”
Child: (builds c-a-p)
Parent: “Good. Now we’re going to change cap to cape. Say cape.”
Child: “Cape.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/k/ /ai/ /p/.”
Parent: “What happened to the vowel sound?”
Child: “It changed.”
Parent: “Yes. Silent e can do that job. Build cape by changing only the vowel part.”
Child: (builds c-a… adds e at the end)
Parent: “Clear it. Tap it. Write cape.”

You are not asking your child to memorize “magic e.” You are letting them see a controlled change, the same way ship/shop/chop taught controlled consonant and vowel changes earlier.

Job 2: Silent e keeps c and g saying their soft sounds

This one is a gift, because it turns what feels like a weird reading/spelling issue into a simple signal.

c can say /k/ (cat) or /s/ (cent)
g can say /g/ (gum) or /j/ (gentle)

Silent e often helps keep c or g soft at the end of a word.

race (not rac)
age (not ag)
dice
huge

If your child has ever written “rac” for race because they heard /r/ /ai/ /s/, they weren’t being careless. They were spelling what they heard with the keys they knew. Silent e is the sign that tells us which sound the c is doing.

Here’s how you coach it without drama:

Parent: “Word is race.”
Child: “Race.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: “/r/ /ai/ /s/.”
Parent: “Build it.”
Child: (builds r-a… reaches for s)
Parent: “Good hearing. That last sound is /s/. One way to spell /s/ is ce at the end. The e is quiet, but it keeps the c soft.”

This is one of those moments where you can feel your own confidence matter. If you treat it like a random add-on, your child will too. If you treat it like, “Oh, this is a known job,” your child relaxes.

Job 3: Silent e keeps a word from ending in v (and this is why have makes sense)

You previewed this in 5.2 and again in 6.1: English words don’t end in v. This is one of those foundational spelling conventions that makes so many high-frequency words suddenly feel logical.

So what does English do when a word would naturally end in v?

It adds a silent e.

have, give, live, love
five (and here it also does the long vowel job)
move (and here it affects vowel sound in a different way, which we’ll treat as a spelling pattern your child will learn through practice)

This job is especially powerful because it prevents a very specific kind of list-memorization pain. Kids often memorize have as “h-a-v-e because it’s weird,” and then they still write hav.

Now you can give a reason that actually sticks:

Parent: “Tap have.”
Child: “/h/ /a/ /v/.”
Parent: “Right. We hear /v/ at the end. English words don’t end in v, so we add silent e. It’s not random. It’s a rule.”

Notice how this fits Sound First: you are honoring the sound map first, then layering the spelling convention on top.

Job 4: Silent e makes some words different from other words that would look the same (no job except ‘not that word’)

This is the job parents don’t get told, and it causes a lot of confusion because it sounds too simple. But it’s real.

There are times when silent e is there to prevent confusion with another word, or to mark a word as a real English word in a way that has nothing to do with a long vowel or a soft c/g.

Examples you can use:

ore (so it isn’t or)
wore (so it isn’t wor, which isn’t a word)
one (the pronunciation is its own story, but the e helps mark it as the word one)
done, gone (same idea: the e is part of the word’s spelling pattern, not a vowel-length tool)

For your child, you don’t need to make this philosophical. You can say, “Sometimes silent e is there because English decided this word is spelled with e. It helps us recognize it as this word.”

What matters is that you stop calling it an exception. You label it as a known job: “difference marker.”

Job 5: Silent e keeps a word from ending in a consonant that looks ‘too bare’ in English (word-ending marker)

English spelling has preferences. One of them is that certain short, common words tend to be marked with an e at the end even when the vowel is still short.

love is the classic one because it overlaps with the “no v at the end” rule, but you see this with words like:

come, some
done, none
have, give

Your child does not need a full history lesson. What they need is permission to see silent e as part of the spelling signal system, not a

trick.

You can say, “Silent e sometimes helps finish a word. It’s a word marker.”

Job 6: Silent e can show that a word is not plural (the plural signal job)

This one comes up later, but it’s worth naming because it stops a common confusion.

Compare:

horse (one horse) vs hors (not a plural; the plural is horses)
please (a verb) vs pleas (a noun, as in “his pleas”)

In many cases, the e is part of a larger spelling pattern that signals how the word behaves when endings get added. You don’t have to force this early. Just know it exists, because as soon as your child starts writing longer sentences, they will bump into words where an e seems to be “just there.” Often, it’s there because English is protecting how the word reads and functions.

Job 7: Silent e can protect meaning when words are built (the morphology helper job)

This is the job that becomes gold in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, when you start adding suffixes and studying word families. Sometimes the e stays so the base word is recognizable, even if the pronunciation shifts slightly over time.

Think of words like:

please plus ing becomes pleasing (the e drops, but it mattered in the base)
judge plus ment becomes judgment (spelling conventions vary, but the base judge is clear)
use, used, usage (the e is part of the base that carries meaning)

You do not need to teach all of that now. But you can begin saying one sentence that will save you later:

Parent: “Sometimes silent e helps us keep the base word clear. It’s a meaning helper.”

Job 8: Silent e can change the sound of th (this is rare but real)

You’ll see pairs like:

bath (noun) and bathe (verb)
breath (noun) and breathe (verb)

This is a beautiful example to use with older kids who think they're "too old" for rules. It shows silent e affecting a consonant sound, not the vowel.

You can handle it like a discovery:

Parent: "Say bath."
Child: "Bath."
Parent: "Say bathe."
Child: "Bathe."
Parent: "What changed?"
Child: "The th sound."
Parent: "Right. Silent e can sometimes do that job."

This is not an early-spelling daily target. It's a "file it under known jobs" so you don't feel blindsided later.

Job 9: Silent e can show a syllable boundary or pronunciation preference in certain words

This one is the loosest, and you will use it least in early practice, but it helps explain why some words keep an e even when you're not hearing it do the classic jobs.

Words like:

little (not silent e, but shows how English uses letters to manage syllables)
recipe (silent e affects the first vowel sound and also helps mark pronunciation)
maybe (the e is part of a spelling pattern that keeps the word readable)

For your everyday kitchen-table lessons, you can translate this job into one calm parent truth: "Sometimes silent e helps the word look and read right in English."

That's enough.

Now, here's the important part: you do not teach all nine jobs to your child like a list.

You teach silent e the Sound First way: as a decision tool inside BUILD,

when a real word needs it.

So what does this look like tomorrow, when your child is spelling and hits silent e?

It looks like you staying upstream and naming the job in one sentence.

If the word is kite, you say, “Silent e is making the vowel long.”
If the word is race, you say, “Silent e keeps c soft.”
If the word is have, you say, “English words don’t end in v, so we add silent e.”

Then you clear the tiles and make your child retrieve and write the word, because that is where mapping happens. The explanation is not the lesson. The retrieval is the lesson.

And if your child asks the very reasonable question, “How do I know which job it is?” you answer the Sound First way:

Parent: “We listen to the sounds first. Then we look at what the word needs. Over time, these jobs will feel familiar. For now, I’ll coach you.”

That sentence keeps the promise of this whole book: no guessing, no shame, just steps and tools.

Silent e is not an exception factory. It is one of the most consistent sign systems in English. When you stop treating it like a trick and start treating it like a set of jobs, you change the emotional temperature again.

Because now, when an e shows up quietly at the end of a word, your child doesn’t have to think, “English is stupid.”

They can think, “Oh. Silent e is doing something. Let’s find the job.”

At this point in the book, you have earned the right to stop bracing yourself.

You have a method that works at the kitchen table. You have a way to keep the pencil from hijacking the brain. You can hear your child start to do it, too: the pause, the taps, the deliberate build instead of the frantic scribble. You’ve already watched “thin” turn into a teachable moment instead of a wrong answer. You’ve watched ship and shop become a simple vowel swap instead of two unrelated words. You’ve watched miss turn into “short vowel, FLOSS, double it” instead of “why is there another s?”

And now we're standing at the line where many parents have lived for years: the line between "words that make sense" and "words you just have to memorize."

This section is here to erase that line.

Not by pretending English is perfectly phonetic. It's not. English is a layer cake. But layer cake is not chaos. It's structure.

Here is the simplest way to say what makes English make sense:

English spelling is built to protect three things at once: sound, meaning, and history.

Most programs act like English is only trying to do sound, and when it fails to be purely sound-based, they call it an exception. But English is doing more than one job. When you know what the jobs are, "mystery words" start turning into "words with reasons."

You already know the first layer. Sound.

That's everything you've been practicing since Chapter 2. HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE. If the sounds aren't clear, nothing else matters yet. Sound is the foundation. It's why jump spelled jup is usually a missing sound, not a character flaw. It's why we tap before we write. It's why sh is one tile: one sound.

Then you learned the next layer. Spelling choices for sounds.

That's your phonograms, your key ring. /sh/ can be sh. /ai/ can be ai, ay, or a_e. That alone takes a huge number of words out of the "random" category and puts them into the "there are options" category.

Then you added a third layer. Rules and signals.

FLOSS. Ck after a short vowel in one-syllable words. Silent e and its jobs. These aren't trivia facts. They are decision tools. They tell your child what to do when more than one spelling could work.

And now we add the final piece that makes the whole picture settle: English often keeps spellings consistent inside word families, even when pronunciation shifts.

That is what makes English feel like it's "breaking the sound rules" when it's actually keeping a meaning promise.

Let’s look at the words that cause the most despair in real life. The small, common, high-frequency ones. The ones that show up everywhere, so your child can’t avoid them, and therefore gets corrected on them constantly.

Have. Give. Love. Does. Said. Two. They. One. Because.

A list-based approach shrugs and says, “Sight words. Memorize.” A sound-first approach does something much more calming: it asks, “Which layer is this word using most?”

Take have, because we’ve been circling it on purpose.

You already did the sound work: /h/ /a/ /v/. Your child can tap it. Great. That means it’s not a sound mystery.

Now you ask, “What does English do with v at the end of a word?”

You already learned the convention: English words don’t end in v, so we add silent e.

So have is no longer a weird word your child has to photograph in their brain. It’s a regular sound map with a known spelling convention layered on top.

And notice what just happened to you as the parent. Your job changed.

You are no longer the keeper of the correct spelling who waits at the end to judge the attempt. You are the coach who can say, upstream, “We hear /v/ at the end. What do we do?”

Child: “Add silent e.”

That one moment can change a child’s identity. Not because they magically spelled have forever in one day, but because they experienced spelling as solvable.

Now look at give and love.

They are the same story. The e isn’t there because English is trying to hurt children. It’s there because English has a convention about v. If your child writes giv or lov, you don’t treat it like “you forgot the e.” You treat it like “you didn’t apply the convention yet.”

Parent: “Tap give.”
Child: “/g/ /i/ /v/.”

Parent: “Right. We hear /v/. English doesn’t end words in v. What do we add?”
Child: “Silent e.”
Parent: “Build it. Clear it. Write it.”

No shame. Just steps.

Now take a different kind of mystery word, one that isn’t about silent e at all. Take does.

A child hears /d/ /u/ /z/ in many accents, or /d/ /uh/ /z/. Either way, the vowel sound doesn’t match the letter o the way they expect. This is where parents often panic because it feels like “not phonetic.”

But remember the layer cake. Sound is still first, but it’s not the only layer. In a word like does, history is showing. English often keeps spellings connected across a family even when pronunciation shifts.

Do and does are related. The spelling keeps the connection visible. The o is part of that family spelling, even though the vowel sound in does is not the long /oo/ of do.

You don’t have to give your child a history lecture. You just have to stop calling it random.

You can say, “This word is in the do family. It keeps the o even though the sound is different.” Then you build it, clear it, and write it like always.

And here’s the key Sound First move: you still tap it first.

Because tapping keeps your child from learning the worst habit of all: spelling by vibes.

If you treat does like a picture word only, you train your child to rely on fragile visual memory. If you tap it and then say, “The vowel spelling is o in this word because it belongs to the do family,” you train your child to keep sound in the process even when spelling includes another layer.

That is how you prevent mystery.

Now take said, another word that causes daily grief.

Your child taps /s/ /e/ /d/ or /s/ /eh/ /d/, depending on speech. They naturally want to write sed. They are not wrong to want that. They are representing the sounds they hear with the keys they know.

This is where your tone matters. If you treat sed as lazy, you make spelling personal. If you treat sed as a reasonable sound spelling that needs an upgrade, you keep spelling inside the code.

You can say, “You spelled it the way it sounds. Good sound work. In this word, the /e/ sound is spelled ai. This is an old spelling that stayed.” Then you build s-ai-d, clear it, and write said.

Notice what you just gave your child: a compliment they earned (their sound map was accurate) and a reason for the upgrade (this word uses a less common key).

That is how “tricky words” stop being emotional landmines. They become advanced code, taught in the same calm steps.

Now let’s talk about the parent question that often sits under all of this.

“But if English has all these layers, how is my child supposed to know what to do?”

They’re not supposed to know everything at once. They are supposed to have a process that finds the next right move.

That process is exactly what you’ve been building through the five steps.

HEAR and SAY keep the target word clear.
TAP pulls the sounds apart so nothing gets lost.
BUILD is where you choose spellings and apply rules and signals.
WRITE is where the brain retrieves and maps.

When a word doesn’t go smoothly, Sound First doesn’t ask, “Why can’t you remember?” It asks, “Which layer is this word using, and which layer does my child need right now?”

Here is what that looks like as a quick diagnostic you can run without a worksheet, without a test, and without turning your table into a courtroom.

If your child misspells a word, ask three questions in order:

First: “Did they tap all the sounds?”

If no, it’s a segmentation issue. Go back to Chapter 3. Tap again. Slow it down. Stretch it. Fix the hearing upstream.

Second: “Did they choose a reasonable phonogram for each sound?”

If no, it’s a key-ring issue. They don’t yet know a spelling option, or they’re not fluent with it. That’s Chapter 5 work: add or review the phonogram, then practice it in a cluster of words.

Third: “Did they miss a rule or a signal?”

If yes, it’s Chapter 6 work: FLOSS, ck, silent e jobs, soft c/g, no final v. The child knew the sounds and had the keys, but didn’t apply the convention yet. That is the easiest kind of mistake to fix, because it comes with a simple coaching sentence.

And sometimes, especially with high-frequency words, there’s a fourth category that doesn’t need to scare you:

“Is this a word where English is protecting meaning or family spelling?”

That’s when you say, calmly, “This word keeps its spelling because it’s connected to this other word,” and you practice it like any other.

You do not need to solve the entire history of English to do this well. You just need to know that sound isn’t the only reason a word is spelled the way it is.

That one belief change is what makes English feel sane.

Because mystery is not just “I don’t know the spelling.” Mystery is “there is no reason, so I can’t learn this.”

Sound First removes that hopelessness. Even when the reason is, “This is an older spelling,” that is still a reason. It tells the child, “You’re not failing a logic test. You’re learning a layered system.”

Now let’s bring this back to your real kitchen table, where a child is looking up at you with that familiar question in their face: “Is that right?”

In the old model, that question means, “Did I guess the picture correctly?”

In this model, the question becomes, “Did I follow the process correctly?”

And you can answer it in a way that builds independence.

You can say, “Let’s not ask me yet. Let’s ask the word.”

Tap it.

Check the vowel sound.
Choose the phonogram.
Apply the rule if there is one.
Clear it.
Write it.

That’s not just a spelling routine. It’s a new relationship with English.

No more mystery words doesn’t mean your child will never meet a hard word again. It means they will stop meeting words as enemies.

They will meet words as builds.

And you will stop feeling like the only way to help is to hand over the answer.

You have tools now. You have keys. You have rules that do jobs. You have a way to explain “weird” words without shrugging.

English makes sense often enough, and in consistent enough ways, that a child can become a strong speller without memorizing weekly piles of isolated facts.

Not because they’re gifted.

Because they’re trained.

And because, day after day, you kept the promise that makes all the layers usable:

You kept it sound first.

Chapter 7: The Suffix Machine: Mastering Endings and Their Rules

If Chapter 6 was the moment your child realized English has rules, Chapter 7 is the moment they realize the rules keep working even when words change.

Because sooner or later, your child stops living in the world of small, tidy base words.

They want to write jumping, jumped, jumps.
They want to write hoping, hoped.
They want to write running, runner.
They want to write stories, not word lists.

And this is where many families get knocked off track. Not because suffixes are impossible, but because suffixes are usually taught as “just add this ending” without teaching what happens to the base word when you add it.

So kids memorize piles of changed words: hop becomes hopping, hope becomes hoping, run becomes running, make becomes making. They may even get them right on a test. Then a week later they guess again, because no one gave them the machine.

Suffixing is a machine. It runs on three major settings.

Double.
Drop.
Change.

When you learn these three, a huge number of spelling decisions stop feeling like separate facts. They become predictable moves you can apply during BUILD, before your child writes.

And we are going to teach them the same way we’ve taught everything else: sound first, then spelling, then rules as decision tools. No rescuing with “it just looks right.” No circling mistakes after the fact like a red-pen judge. Upstream coaching that your child can eventually do without you.

First, let’s make sure we mean the same thing by suffix.

A suffix is an ending you add to a base word to change its meaning or its job in the sentence.

jump becomes jumping
help becomes helpful
play becomes played
sad becomes sadness

In Sound First language, a suffix is not a brand-new word your child has to memorize. It is a base plus an ending, built on purpose.

That's why suffixing fits the five steps so beautifully. You are still going to HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE. The only difference is that now you are building in two chunks: the base and the suffix.

Here is the promise of this section: your child does not have to guess what happens to the base word when a suffix is added. The code has a small set of reliable moves.

Move 1: Double

Doubling is the move that scares parents because it looks like "extra letters for no reason." But it is reasoned, and it connects directly to something your child already learned in Chapter 6: English likes to protect vowel sounds.

You already saw that in the FLOSS rule and in ck after a short vowel. Doubling is another way English protects a short vowel when something is added.

Here is the simplest, most useful version for home practice:

If a one-syllable base word ends in one vowel letter followed by one consonant, we often double that final consonant before adding a vowel suffix like ing or ed.

That sentence can sound like too much, so at the table we make it shorter:

One vowel, one consonant, one syllable: double.

Let's do it with a word your child already knows how to tap.

hop

Parent: "Word is hopping."
Child: "Hopping."
Parent: "Say the base word."
Child: "Hop."

Parent: “Tap hop.”
Child: “/h/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “Good. Now we’re adding ing. Listen: hop plus ing.”
Child: “Hopping.”
Parent: “Before we build, check the end of hop. One vowel, one consonant, one syllable. What do we do?”
Child: “Double.”
Parent: “Yes. Build hop with two p’s before ing.”

Tiles make this feel almost unfairly clear.

Build hop: h o p
Now double the last consonant: h o p p
Now add ing: h o p p ing

Then you clear it, tap it, and write hopping.

If your child writes hoping instead, you don’t say, “No, it’s hopping.” You return to the machine.

Parent: “Let’s check the base. What is the base word?”
Child: “Hop.”
Parent: “Does hop end with one vowel and one consonant?”
Child: “Yes.”
Parent: “Then what do we do before ing?”
Child: “Double the p.”

No shame. No “you forgot.” Just the setting they didn’t apply yet.

Now contrast that with a word that looks similar but uses a different move.

Move 2: Drop

This is the one families call “silent e drops,” and it is exactly what it sounds like.

If a base word ends in silent e, we usually drop the e before adding a vowel suffix, especially ing, ed, er, est.

hope becomes hoping
make becomes making
ride becomes riding

This connects directly to Chapter 6. Silent e has jobs. One of its biggest jobs is making the vowel long. But when you add a suffix that starts with

a vowel, the word doesn’t need the e to do that job anymore. The suffix brings a vowel with it, and the spelling system usually chooses clean, readable forms.

At the table, you coach it as a simple build move:

Silent e before a vowel suffix: drop it.

And this is where your child finally gets to understand why hop and hope behave differently without memorizing two separate lists.

hop plus ing becomes hopping (double)
hope plus ing becomes hoping (drop)

They are different because the base words are different, and the base words are doing different vowel jobs.

Here is a kitchen-table sequence that makes the contrast click.

Parent: “We’re going to build two words: hopping and hoping. They sound close, but they mean different things.”
Child: “Okay.”
Parent: “First word is hopping, like a bunny hopping.”
Child: “Hopping.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Hop.”
Parent: “Does hop have silent e?”
Child: “No.”
Parent: “One vowel, one consonant, one syllable. So we…”
Child: “Double.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Build hopping. Clear. Write.

Parent: “Second word is hoping, like I am hoping for a sunny day.”
Child: “Hoping.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Hope.”
Parent: “Does hope end in silent e?”
Child: “Yes.”
Parent: “We’re adding ing, which starts with a vowel. What do we do with silent e?”
Child: “Drop it.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Build hoping. Clear. Write.

That is the machine at work. And notice what else you just taught: spelling and meaning travel together. Hopping and hoping aren't just spelling puzzles. They are different words. The rules help keep them readable and consistent.

Now, parents often ask a practical question right here: "How do I know whether to double or drop?"

You teach it in an order your child can execute.

Step one: Is there a silent e at the end of the base word?
If yes, drop it before a vowel suffix.
If no, check the doubling pattern: one vowel, one consonant, one syllable.

That's enough to handle a huge number of early suffixing words.

Move 3: Change

Change is the y move, and it's the one that makes older kids sigh because they've been corrected on it for years with no explanation beyond "that's the rule."

Here is the rule in plain language:

If a base word ends in y after a consonant, change the y to i before adding most suffixes.

cry becomes cried
try becomes tried
happy becomes happier
carry becomes carried

But, and this is important, we do not change y to i before ing. We keep the y.

cry becomes crying
carry becomes carrying

If you've ever wondered why, here's the parent-friendly explanation: English avoids ii in the middle of words, and it also prefers readable letter patterns. The system chooses a spelling that keeps the word clear.

At the table, you can keep it simple:

Consonant plus y: change y to i, unless the suffix is ing.

Let’s put that into the five steps with a word your child may want in real writing: cried.

Parent: “Word is cried.”
Child: “Cried.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Cry.”
Parent: “Tap cry.”
Child: “/k/ /r/ /igh/.”
Parent: “We’re adding ed. Cry ends in consonant plus y. What do we do?”
Child: “Change y to i.”
Parent: “Then add ed. Build it.”

Tiles make the move visible: c r y becomes c r i plus ed.

Then clear and write cried.

Now compare with crying.

Parent: “Word is crying.”
Child: “Crying.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Cry.”
Parent: “Same base. Now we add ing. Do we change y to i before ing?”
Child: “No.”
Parent: “Right. Keep the y. Build crying.”

This is one of those places where kids who have been taught “just memorize it” suddenly relax. Because now there is a reason for why cried and crying look different. They aren’t random. They are the machine choosing the right setting for the suffix.

How to teach Double, Drop, Change without turning it into a rules lecture

The fastest way to ruin this is to explain all three moves for ten minutes and then expect your child to remember them.

Instead, you teach them as choices inside BUILD, exactly the way you taught FLOSS and silent e jobs. One sentence. One decision. Then action.

Here is a short scripted mini-lesson you can run in about ten minutes, using only the words you already have the tools for.

1. hopping
2. hoping

3. cried
4. crying

Parent: “Today we’re learning the three suffix moves. When we add an ending, we might double, drop, or change. I will coach you. You don’t have to remember everything at once.”

Word 1: hopping
HEAR, SAY, TAP the base hop.
Parent: “No silent e. One vowel, one consonant, one syllable. Double.”
BUILD hopping. Clear. WRITE.

Word 2: hoping
HEAR, SAY, TAP the base hope.
Parent: “Silent e before ing. Drop the e.”
BUILD hoping. Clear. WRITE.

Word 3: cried
HEAR, SAY, TAP the base cry.
Parent: “Consonant plus y before ed. Change y to i.”
BUILD cried. Clear. WRITE.

Word 4: crying
HEAR, SAY, TAP the base cry.
Parent: “Before ing, keep the y.”
BUILD crying. Clear. WRITE.

Then end. Do not add twelve more words “for practice.” The practice comes tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, in short loops that keep confidence high.

Where parents get stuck, and how to stay sound-first

The most common suffixing mistake is that adults start teaching suffixes as visual patterns and forget to tap.

But tapping still matters, because suffixes add sounds, and children often drop them or muddle them when they rush.

jumped is a perfect example you’ll handle in the next section when you learn that ed has three sounds. But even before that, you can keep your child grounded by doing what you’ve done since Chapter 3: pull the word apart, then build.

Suffixing is not “add letters at the end.” Suffixing is “build the base, choose the right move, then add the ending.”

That is the machine.

And once your child starts using it, you'll notice a new kind of confidence. Not the brittle confidence of "I memorized it last night," but the sturdy confidence of "I know what to check."

They will pause and ask the right questions:

"Does this word have silent e?"
"Is it one vowel, one consonant?"
"Does it end in y?"

That pause is the sound-first pause wearing a new outfit. It's the same calm habit you built when you taught your child to tap before pencil.

Now, instead of using that pause to find sounds, your child uses it to run a spelling decision.

Double.
Drop.
Change.

Not as three rules to recite, but as three settings your child can use to build new words correctly, on purpose, in real writing.

Now we add a suffix that shows up everywhere in your child's writing, and almost everywhere in their corrections.

-ed.

It is the past tense ending for many verbs. It helps your child write about what already happened: jumped, helped, smiled, wanted, played.

And yet it's one of the biggest places children get tripped up, for a very understandable reason.

Because -ed is spelled the same way, but it does not always sound the same way.

If your child has ever written jumpd, helpt, or even wantid, they weren't being careless. They were doing exactly what Sound First trained them to do: write what they hear. The problem is not that they are "bad at spelling." The problem is that nobody told them the truth about this suffix:

The spelling is stable, but the sound changes.

So today you're going to teach your child something that instantly lowers confusion and instantly increases accuracy.

-ed has three sounds.

Sometimes it sounds like /t/.
Sometimes it sounds like /d/.
Sometimes it sounds like /id/ (or /ed/, like a little extra syllable).

Your child does not need to memorize a chart to use this well. They need a decision process they can run inside the five steps, with you coaching the first few times until it becomes automatic.

And it will become automatic, because the ending sound of -ed follows a very consistent pattern.

Here is the pattern in parent language.

If the base word ends in an unvoiced sound, -ed says /t/.
If the base word ends in a voiced sound, -ed says /d/.
If the base word ends in /t/ or /d/, -ed says /id/.

Before you panic at the words voiced and unvoiced, let me translate that into kitchen-table language that works even if you never want to say those terms again.

Unvoiced sounds are the ones you can whisper. Your voice box is not buzzing. Think: /p/ /k/ /f/ /s/ /sh/ /ch/.

Voiced sounds are the ones that make your throat buzz when you say them. Think: /b/ /g/ /v/ /z/ /m/ /n/ /l/ and all vowel sounds.

And /t/ and /d/ are special here because if the base already ends in /t/ or /d/, English adds a whole extra syllable so you can actually say the ending clearly: want plus ed becomes wanted, not wantd.

That's the whole system.

Same spelling. Three possible sounds. Predictable choice based on the last sound of the base word.

Now here is why this fits the Sound First method so perfectly: your child can hear the last sound. That means your child can choose the right -ed sound on purpose, instead of guessing, and without you rescuing them

with “Just remember how it looks.”

We’re going to keep the same spine you’ve used since Chapter 2.

HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

But with suffixes, we also keep the extra habit you built in 7.1: say the base word out loud and check what happens at the end before you build.

Let’s do three words that hit all three -ed sounds, and notice how calm this becomes when you treat it like a machine.

Word 1: jumped (ed says /t/)

Parent: “Word is jumped.”
Child: “Jumped.”
Parent: “What’s the base word?”
Child: “Jump.”
Parent: “Tap jump.”
Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/.”
Parent: “Good. What is the last sound in jump?”
Child: “/p/.”
Parent: “Can you whisper /p/?”
Child: (whispers /p/)
Parent: “Yes. That means -ed will sound like /t/. Say jumped.”
Child: “Jumped.”
Parent: “Tap jumped.”

This is where you may notice something important. Many children will tap jumped as /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/ /t/. That is exactly right. They hear a /t/ at the end.

Now BUILD.

Parent: “Build jump.”
Child: (builds j u m p)
Parent: “Now add the past tense ending. We spell it e d even though it sounds like /t/. Add ed.”

Your child adds the tiles e and d if you have them as suffix tiles, or simply places e and d letter tiles at the end. If you prefer to keep suffixes as one chunk, you can make an ed tile later, but it’s not necessary. The key learning is not the tile shape. It’s the stable spelling with a changing sound.

Then you do what you always do: clear it and retrieve it.

Parent: “Sweep it back. Tap jumped again.”
Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/ /t/.”
Parent: “Write jumped.”

If your child writes jumpt, you now have a very calm correction that does not fight their ears.

Parent: “You heard /t/. Good listening. We spell that past tense ending with e d. Fix the ending.”

That sentence is magic for kids who have been shamed for “not paying attention.” You’re telling them the truth: their sound map is fine. Now they are learning the spelling convention.

Word 2: played (ed says /d/)

Now give your child one where the ending is clearly /d/.

Parent: “Word is played.”
Child: “Played.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Play.”
Parent: “Tap play.”
Child: “/p/ /l/ /ai/.”
Parent: “What’s the last sound in play?”
Child: “/ai/.”
Parent: “That’s a voiced sound. Put your hand on your throat and say /ai/.”
Child: (does)
Parent: “Feel the buzz? That means -ed will sound like /d/. Say played.”
Child: “Played.”
Parent: “Tap played.”
Child: “/p/ /l/ /ai/ /d/.”

Then BUILD: play + ed. Clear. WRITE: played.

If your child tries to add a whole extra syllable and says “play-id,” you don’t correct harshly. You simply compare it to the base.

Parent: “Listen: play. Played. Do you hear an extra syllable?”
Child: “No.”
Parent: “Right. This one is just /d/ at the end.”

This keeps your child from overusing the /id/ pronunciation.

Word 3: wanted (ed says /id/)

Now you teach the special case that makes so many kids stumble.

Parent: “Word is wanted.”
Child: “Wanted.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Want.”
Parent: “Tap want.”
Child: “/w/ /o/ /n/ /t/.”
Parent: “What is the last sound?”
Child: “/t/.”
Parent: “When the base ends in /t/ or /d/, -ed makes an extra syllable. It says /id/. Say wanted.”
Child: “Want-ed.”
Parent: “Tap wanted.”
Child: “/w/ /o/ /n/ /t/ /i/ /d/.”

And now BUILD. This is a great place to keep the meaning clear, because wanted is a word kids use in real sentences: “I wanted the red one.”

Parent: “Build want.”
Child: (builds w a n t, or w o n t depending on the word you choose and your child’s current phonogram set; many families start with want as a taught high-frequency pattern)
Parent: “Now add ed. We still spell it e d. This time we pronounce it /id/ because the base ends in /t/.”

Clear. Tap. Write.

If your child writes wantid, again, notice how sound-first protects their confidence. They heard /id/ and they spelled /id/. That is reasonable.

Now you get to say, calmly: “Great listening. In English, we spell that past tense syllable with e d.”

You are not fighting their ear. You’re teaching them the stable spelling.

A simple way to remember the three -ed sounds without a lecture

Some children love a quick memory hook. Some children hate them. If your child likes them, here is one that stays sound-first.

Parent: “If the base ends in /t/ or /d/, we say /id/. If not, we usually just add a /t/ or /d/ sound depending on the last sound.”

Then you immediately use it in words so it’s not just a chant floating in space.

You can also give them a tiny sort, which is a very Sound First way to teach patterns: you sort by last sound, not by how the word looks.

Say these bases aloud and ask your child to tell you what -ed will sound like.

jump ends in /p/ so -ed says /t/ (jumped)
pack ends in /k/ so -ed says /t/ (packed)
play ends in a vowel so -ed says /d/ (played)
rain ends in /n/ so -ed says /d/ (rained)
want ends in /t/ so -ed says /id/ (wanted)
need ends in /d/ so -ed says /id/ (needed)

Then, and this matters, you build and write at least two of them. Sorting without building turns into a talking exercise. Building turns it into spelling.

Where this goes wrong, and how to fix it upstream

There are three common -ed stalls. When you know them, you can fix them quickly.

Stall 1: The child spells only the sound and drops the spelling.

jumpt, helpt, kickt

This is the most common, and it is exactly what a sound-first child will do before they learn this convention.

Fix: Praise the listening, then teach the stable spelling.

Parent: “You heard /t/. Good. We spell past tense with e d. Change the ending to ed.”

Then run the clear-and-write move again so the corrected form gets mapped.

Stall 2: The child adds an extra syllable everywhere.

play-id, jump-id

Fix: Contrast with the base word and listen for syllables.

Parent: “Say play. Say played. Do you hear an extra syllable?”
Child: “No.”
Parent: “Right. Only bases that end in /t/ or /d/ get the extra syllable.”

Stall 3: The child writes ed correctly in isolated words but forgets it in sentences.

This is not laziness. It is cognitive load. When your child is trying to think of ideas, punctuation, handwriting, and spelling all at once, the newest conventions drop out first.

Fix: Reduce the load while keeping the transfer.

Have your child write one short sentence that you dictate, using one -ed word you just practiced.

Parent: “Write: I jumped.”
Or, for older kids: “Write: I wanted to play.”

You can even let them build the -ed word with tiles first, clear it, then write it in the sentence. That keeps writing connected to the method instead of turning sentence writing into a separate, stressful event.

The real win you are aiming for

The goal is not that your child can recite “three sounds of -ed.”

The goal is that when your child writes about the past, they stop hesitating and they stop guessing.

They will begin to do what strong spellers do automatically: they will say the base, notice the last sound, choose the right pronunciation, and still write e d because that is the spelling.

And if they forget, you have a calm, upstream script that preserves everything Sound First has built so far:

“Say the base word.”
“What is the last sound?”
“Does it end in /t/ or /d/?”
“Then how will -ed sound?”
“Even if it sounds like /t/ or /d/ or /id/, how do we spell it?”

You are teaching a machine, not a list.

And once -ed clicks, it becomes the model for the next big suffix choices

your child will learn: other endings that behave consistently, patterns that keep meaning intact, and those fork-in-the-road spellings like tion and sion that we're about to tackle next.

There is a moment, usually a few weeks after -ed starts to click, when parents feel a new kind of frustration.

Not the old list-frustration. This one is more specific. It sounds like this:

"My child can do hopped and hoping. They can do cried and crying. They even remember that jumped ends with ed even though it sounds like /t/. But now they're writing words like action and mission and they freeze. Or they write acshun. Or they write mishen. And I don't know what to say besides, 'That's just how it's spelled.'"

Good news: you do not have to go back to "just memorize it."

These endings feel tricky because they sit right at the intersection of everything you've learned so far: sound segmentation, phonograms, and rules that protect meaning and readability.

They also expose a truth that strong spellers eventually learn: sometimes English keeps a stable spelling chunk for a common ending even when the sound is the same across many words.

In other words, this is not about your child being sloppy with sounds. This is about teaching a few high-utility spelling choices for a very common sound at the end of longer words.

Let's name the sound first, because Sound First always does.

The ending sound you're dealing with is /shun/.

You hear it in action, motion, station, attention, mission, invention.

Your child can usually hear it. If you stretch the word, they can tap it. The problem is that /shun/ can be spelled more than one way.

The two most common spellings you will meet early are tion and sion.

There are others you'll see later (cian in musician, tian in Christian, and some more), but tion and sion are the workhorses. If you teach your child how to approach the fork between those two, you remove a big chunk of "mystery word" stress from daily writing.

Here is the first thing to say, out loud, to yourself as a parent:

This is a spelling choice problem, not a sound problem.

That sentence keeps your tone calm. It keeps you from treating it like a failure of attention. Your child is hearing /shun/ and trying to spell it. They just don’t know which key to use yet.

So we teach the keys.

And because this is Sound First, we teach them inside the routine your child already trusts.

HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

But we add one extra move that is going to start showing up more and more as your child gets older: we use the base word, or the word family, to help us choose the spelling.

You already did this in Chapter 6 when you explained does as part of the do family and said as an older spelling that stayed. This is the same kind of thinking, now applied to endings.

Start with the most common: tion

If you had to bet on one spelling for /shun/, tion is the one you’d pick most of the time.

action
motion
station
nation
fiction
vacation

At the table, you don’t need a speech. You just need a stable chunk your child can build and write.

Parent: “Word is action.”
Child: “Action.”
Parent: “Tap it slowly.”
Child: “/a/ /k/ /shun/.” (Some children will tap more finely: /a/ /k/ /sh/ /u/ /n/. Either is fine. You’re listening for whether they hear the ending as a chunk.)
Parent: “Good. The ending /shun/ is often spelled tion. We’re going to use that chunk. Build ac plus tion.”

If you're using tiles, this is a perfect place to make a chunk tile. Not because your child needs more stuff, but because keeping common endings as chunks reduces cognitive load and keeps BUILD from turning into "find twelve tiny pieces."

You can make a small set of ending tiles: tion, sion, ture, sure, ous. You will use them constantly in upper-elementary spelling, and they function exactly like phonogram tiles did earlier: sound-spellings that can be selected on purpose.

But even if you don't make special tiles, you can still treat it like a chunk in your language.

Parent: "Write the ending t-i-o-n together. That four-letter chunk spells /shun/ at the end of this word."

Then you clear and WRITE from recall the way you always do. The goal is not that your child can copy tion. The goal is that their brain can retrieve it as the chosen ending for that word.

Now the fork: when do we use sion?

Here's where parents often expect a single, perfect rule. English usually doesn't give us that kind of simplicity at this level. What it gives us is something slightly different: patterns tied to word families.

A very useful starting pattern is this:

If the base word ends in d or t, the /shun/ ending is often tion.
If the base word ends in ss or sometimes d, the /shun/ ending is often sion.

You can see it if you line up a few word pairs:

invent becomes invention (ends in t, so tion)
prevent becomes prevention (ends in t, so tion)
attend becomes attention (ends in d, but the related forms push toward tion in this family)

But:

discuss becomes discussion (ends in ss, so sion)
confess becomes confession (ends in ss, so sion)
express becomes expression (ends in ss, so sion)

This is not a "chant it and you're done" rule. It's a decision helper that

points your child toward the base word. And that is exactly what you want, because it grows them toward the morphology work you'll do later in Chapter 8 without you needing to jump ahead into a full word-study program right now.

So at the table, your coaching sounds like this:

Parent: "Word is discussion."
Child: "Discussion."
Parent: "What's the base word you hear in there?"
Child: "Discuss."
Parent: "Good. Discuss ends with ss. When a word keeps that ss, the /shun/ ending is often sion. Build discuss plus sion."

Then, as always: clear, tap, write.

Notice what you just did. You didn't ask your child to memorize discussion as a picture. You asked them to anchor it to a word they already know. You made spelling serve meaning.

And that changes a child's experience. Suddenly discussion is not a long, intimidating string. It's discuss plus an ending.

Now compare with action.

Parent: "Listen: act is inside action."
Child: "Act."
Parent: "Yes. Act plus ion. In this word, we spell /shun/ as tion: action."

If your child is older and you want one extra sentence that deepens understanding without turning it into a lecture, you can add:

Parent: "That ending has the letters i-o-n, and in these words it makes the /shun/ sound. We're going to learn a few endings that do that."

What to do when your child writes acshun or mishen

Treat these as honest sound spellings that need an upgrade, exactly the way you treated jumpt and wantid in the -ed section.

Because that's what they are.

acshun shows your child heard /k/ and /shun/ and tried to represent it with the keys they know.
mishen shows they heard /shun/ and reached for "en," a common ending in their experience.

Your correction script should protect that honesty.

Parent: “You spelled it the way it sounds. Good tapping. This ending is one of our special chunks. In this word, /shun/ is spelled tion. Let’s fix the ending.”

Then you have them rebuild the word correctly (tiles if you have them), clear it, and write it again. The rebuild matters because it keeps the correction inside the process rather than becoming a red-pen moment.

A simple way to practice the fork without overwhelming your child

You are not going to teach twenty /shun/ words in one sitting. You’re going to teach two small families and let repetition do its work, just like you did with ship/shop/chop and with hopping/hoping.

Here is a tight, workable mini-sequence.

Day 1: tion family
action, motion, station

Day 2: sion family (ss base)
discussion, confession, expression

Day 3: mix and sort by base word
Parent: “I’m going to say a word. You tell me which ending chunk we probably need, tion or sion, by thinking of the base word.”
invent… invention
discuss… discussion
act… action
express… expression

Then build and write two of them. Always end with writing, because that is where spelling transfers to real life.

And when your child asks, “But how do I know for sure?”

You tell the truth, the Sound First way.

Parent: “Sometimes we can predict it from the base word, and sometimes we learn it by seeing and using the word. Today, I’m coaching you. Over time, these endings will feel familiar, like -ed.”

Other tricky endings that deserve chunk treatment

Once you've accepted the idea that English has stable ending chunks, you can save your child a lot of guessing by teaching a few more that show up constantly in school writing.

ture as in picture, nature, adventure
This often sounds like /cher/ or /tcher/ depending on the word and accent. Kids write piccher. That's a reasonable sound spelling. Teach the chunk.

Parent: "Word is picture."
Child: "Picture."
Parent: "Tap it."
Child: "/p/ /i/ /k/ /cher/."
Parent: "That ending /cher/ is often spelled t-u-r-e in this kind of word: ture. Build pic plus ture."

sure as in measure, treasure
Often sounds like /zher/ or /sher/. Teach it as a chunk when it comes up.

Parent: "This ending sounds like /zher/. In this word family we spell it sure. It's a chunk we'll see again."

ous as in famous, nervous, dangerous
This ending is high-frequency in older writing, and kids misspell it constantly because it's hard to hear clearly and easy to confuse with us.

Parent: "Listen: famous. The ending is /us/. In many describing words, that ending is spelled o-u-s: famous."

tion, sion, ture, sure, ous. Those five chunks carry an enormous amount of upper-elementary spelling.

And notice how this fits perfectly with what you promised back in Chapter 5: a manageable key ring. These are keys. They unlock lots of doors.

How to keep it sound-first when endings are chunks

A chunk is not a shortcut around tapping. A chunk is what you choose after tapping.

So you keep your order:

Tap the word.
Identify the ending sound.
Choose the chunk spelling.
Build the word.
Clear it.

Write it.

If you skip tapping because “we already know it ends in tion,” you invite guessing back in through the side door. Your child starts building by habit instead of by sound, and then the first time the word isn’t what they expected, their confidence drops.

Tapping keeps the word honest. Chunks keep the spelling manageable.

And this is the deeper win of this section: your child is learning that longer words are not harder because they are longer. They are easier when you can see their parts.

action is act plus ion.
discussion is discuss plus ion (spelled sion here).
picture is pic plus ture.

That is the Suffix Machine expanding. It started with -ed and -ing. Now it includes common ending chunks that show up in real school writing, real books, and real sentences your child wants to write.

So when your child freezes halfway through “invention” or “confession,” you can lean on the same calm coaching voice you used for jumped and wanted:

“Say the base word.”
“Tap the ending.”
“Choose the chunk.”
“Build it.”
“Clear it.”
“Write it.”

No guessing. No shame. Just the next right move.

Chapter 8: When Words Have Ancestors: Morphology for Older Learners

If Chapter 7 was where your child learned that words can change without turning into chaos, Chapter 8 is where your older child discovers something even bigger: words have families.

And those families have ancestors.

Up to now, the method has leaned heavily on sound. That was on purpose. Sound is the front door to spelling. It is the part your child can hear, tap, and build right now. Phonograms gave you the keys. Rules like FLOSS, ck, silent e jobs, and Double, Drop, Change gave you decision tools. Endings like tion and sion became chunks instead of traps.

But if your child is around nine or older, or if they are a strong reader whose spelling still feels oddly fragile, you may be noticing a new kind of problem.

It’s not the early problem of “I can’t hear the sounds.”

It’s this:

“I can hear the sounds, but the spelling still surprises me.”

Your child can tap the word. They can build something reasonable. And yet the correct spelling includes letters that don’t seem to match what they hear, or it keeps a spelling pattern across words even when pronunciation shifts. That’s the moment when sound-only instruction starts to feel like it has a ceiling.

This is where morphology comes in.

Morphology is the study of meaningful word parts.

In kitchen-table language, morphology means this: English often keeps the spelling of a word part the same because it carries meaning, even when the sound changes a little.

This does not replace sound-first. It sits on top of it.

Sound first.
Then spelling choices.
Then rules and signals.
And now, for older learners: meaning families.

This is what I mean by the morphology ascent. You do not start here with a six-year-old who is still working on tapping. You climb here when your child has enough sound skill and enough reading experience to benefit from the next layer.

And the good news is that this layer is not a new program you have to buy. It’s a new lens you can add during BUILD.

You already know how to build words with tiles. Now you’ll start building words with meaning chunks in mind, too.

Here are the three main building blocks in morphology: roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Roots are the core meaning piece.

A root is the part of the word that carries the central meaning. Sometimes the root can stand alone as a word (like help, play, jump). Sometimes it cannot (like aud, spect, struct). Those are often called bound roots because they are bound to other parts. Your child doesn’t need that term. They just need to know, “This chunk shows up again and again, and it always pulls meaning with it.”

Prefixes come before the root and modify meaning.

pre means before
re means again
un means not
dis can mean not or apart
sub means under
trans means across

Suffixes come after the root and often change the job of the word.

You already taught suffixes as a machine in Chapter 7. That still stands. But now you are going to notice something new: suffixes also carry meaning and grammar.

er can mean “a person who does” (teacher)
ful can mean “full of” (helpful)
less can mean “without” (hopeless)
tion often turns a verb into a noun (invent becomes invention)

You’ve already been doing pieces of this without naming it.

When you told your child to find the base word inside discussion (discuss plus sion), you were doing morphology. When you explained does as part of the do family, you were doing morphology. When you said English keeps meaning and family spelling even when sound shifts, you were already pointing toward this chapter.

Now we make it intentional.

Why older kids need this layer

Here is what happens with many capable older kids who were taught spelling as lists.

They become decent at memorizing for Friday.

They also become convinced that spelling is mostly visual, mostly arbitrary, and mostly about being the kind of person who “just remembers.”

That belief is poison for a nine-year-old, because nine-year-olds can feel their own intelligence. They know when they are doing busywork. They know when a subject has depth. If spelling has been shallow and shame-filled for years, they either fight it or give up.

Morphology gives them depth. It makes spelling feel like a real system again.

It also solves a very practical problem: the words older kids need are not simple CVC words anymore. School writing brings in words like inject, inspect, describe, predict, invisible, educator, audition, audience, audible, aquarium, photograph, geography.

Many of those words have spellings that make better sense when you recognize the word parts.

This is also where you will see a powerful shift in your child’s attitude. A child who rolls their eyes at “rules” sometimes lights up when you show them a root that explains ten words at once. It feels like a shortcut, but it’s actually the opposite: it’s a deeper structure.

What “sound first” looks like once morphology enters

Parents sometimes worry that morphology will confuse their child, as if you are about to stop listening for sounds and start analyzing Latin.

You won’t.

The five steps still run the lesson. You still HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

The difference is that during BUILD, you start asking one extra question when it helps:

“Is there a word part here that carries meaning and shows up in other words?”

That question is not a quiz. It’s a spotlight.

Sometimes the answer is no, and you just spell the word with phonograms and rules.

Sometimes the answer is yes, and that yes becomes the reason a spelling stays stable.

Take the root aud, the one we teased in the outline for this chapter because it’s such a clean example.

Aud means hear.

You see it in:

audio
audible
audience
audition
auditorium

Notice what happens to the pronunciation.

Audio starts with /aw/ or /ah/ depending on accent.
Audible sounds like /aw/ or /ah/ plus /d/ plus a schwa.
Audience changes again.
Audition shifts again.

If your child is trying to spell these words from sound alone, they will do reasonable things that won’t match the standard spelling. They might write odio. Or awdio. Or odishun. Their ears aren’t broken. The word family is simply carrying meaning through a stable spelling chunk.

So the instruction becomes: keep the meaning chunk stable.

Here is how that can sound at your kitchen table, without turning into a lecture.

Parent: “Word is audible.”
Child: “Audible.”
Parent: “Say it again.”
Child: “Audible.”
Parent: “Tap it.”
Child: (taps, approximate is fine) “/aw/ /d/ /i/ /b/ /l/.”
Parent: “Great. Now here’s the extra piece for older kids. This word has a root. The root is aud, and it means hear. You can see it in audio. We are going to keep aud spelled a-u-d in this whole family, even when the sound shifts a little. Build aud first.”

Then you build the rest the way you always would, choosing phonograms and applying rules as needed.

The child is still mapping sound to spelling. But now their mapping is anchored to meaning.

Morphology doesn’t remove the need to practice. It gives practice more hooks.

And those hooks matter because older kids are juggling more.

They are juggling more vocabulary, more subjects, more writing, more speed. A root gives them something to hold onto when the spelling feels big.

How to introduce roots without making your child hate it

Start small. Start with a root that your child already sees in several familiar words.

Then make it feel like a discovery, not an assignment.

Here are three root families that work well for many families:

1. struct means build

construct
instruct
structure
destruct

This is a gift because the meaning is so concrete. You can say, “struct is the build root.”

2. spect means look

inspect
respect
spectator
spectacle

You can play with meaning: inspect is “look into,” respect is “look again” or “look back” in the sense of regard. The point is not to debate etymology at the table. The point is that spect is a stable spelling chunk that helps you spell a whole set.

3. port means carry

transport
import
export
portable

Kids enjoy this one because the meaning connections click quickly.

The key is to treat roots as useful tools, not as trivia facts. You are not trying to create a Latin student. You are trying to create a speller who can see why spelling stays stable across a family.

Now, notice something important: this approach is not only for fancy words. It also helps with everyday spelling.

Take sign and signal.

A child hears sign as /s/ /igh/ /n/ and wants to write sin or sine. They’re not wrong. They’re hearing. But the g in sign is there because of the family: signal, signature, design.

That silent letter isn’t there to be mean. It’s there because English often keeps a spelling to protect meaning across related words.

This is the exact promise you made in Chapter 6. English protects sound, meaning, and history. Morphology is where meaning protection becomes visible.

When to start the morphology ascent

This layer is most helpful when:

Your child can tap sounds fairly reliably in one-syllable and two-syllable

words.
Your child is reading longer words and asking about them.
Your child's spelling errors are no longer mostly about missing sounds, but about choosing spellings that don't match the word family.
Your child is old enough to enjoy "why" explanations.

For some kids, that's eight. For many, it's nine to twelve. For a struggling speller, it might be later, and that's fine. For a racing reader with weak spelling, it might be earlier, because morphology gives them structure fast.

The method doesn't change. The focus shifts.

Instead of only asking, "What sounds do we hear?" you start asking, "What sounds do we hear, and what meaning parts do we recognize?"

How prefixes and suffixes fit into this ascent

In Chapter 7 you taught suffix rules as a machine: Double, Drop, Change. That machine is still running. But now you will notice that many longer words are not just base plus suffix. They are prefix plus root plus suffix.

This is where spelling becomes dramatically easier for older kids, because long words stop being long strings. They become assemblies.

Re plus act plus ion becomes reaction.
In plus vent plus ion becomes invention.
Dis pluscuss plus ion becomes discussion.

You can hear how this connects directly to the tion and sion fork you taught in 7.3. You were already asking, "What's the base word?" That is morphology thinking. Now you extend it: "Is there a prefix? Is there a root? What suffix is attached?"

And the same calm rule applies: you do not teach this as a list of terms. You teach it as a way to build.

Parent: "Word is invention."
Child: "Invention."
Parent: "What word do you hear inside it?"
Child: "Invent."
Parent: "Yes. That's our base. Now we add the ending chunk. Tap it, then build invent plus tion."

You're not abandoning sound. You're using sound to locate the parts.

A final reassurance before we go deeper

Morphology is not a detour from spelling. It is one of the reasons English spelling is as stable and useful as it is.

If English were purely sound-based, spelling would change every time pronunciation shifted. We would lose the visible connections between related words. English chose a different compromise: it often keeps meaning visible through spelling.

Once your child sees that, a whole category of “Why is that letter there?” questions becomes answerable with one calm sentence.

“It’s there because this word belongs to a family, and English keeps the family spelling.”

That sentence is not hand-waving. It is a real principle. It turns silent letters from enemies into clues.

And it sets you up for the next step in this chapter: learning how to write word sums, so your child can build words the way English builds them, on purpose, with sound, spelling, rules, and meaning all working together.

Word sums are where morphology stops being an interesting idea and becomes a tool your child can use.

If you’ve never seen a word sum before, don’t let the name scare you. It is not math. It is simply a way to show how a word is built from meaning parts, the same way tiles showed how a word is built from sound parts.

In earlier chapters, BUILD meant, “Which phonograms do we choose for the sounds we tapped?” Then it grew to mean, “Which rule do we apply?” (FLOSS, ck, silent e jobs). Then it grew again: “Which suffix setting do we use?” (Double, Drop, Change). Now BUILD gets one more upgrade: “Which meaning parts do we keep stable because this word belongs to a family?”

A word sum is how you write that upgrade down in a clean, non-mushy way.

It looks like this:

aud + ion -> audition

That’s it. That’s the whole format. Parts on the left. Built word on the right.

The arrow just means “becomes” or “builds into.” You can draw a simple arrow, or if you don’t want symbols on the page, you can write “makes” in between. The point is not the punctuation. The point is that your child sees, in ink, that audition is not a long string to memorize. It is aud plus ion, and aud is an ancestor that carries meaning.

Here is what matters most, especially if your child has been burned by spelling for years: the word sum gives them a reason to keep letters that don’t seem to match the sound perfectly.

It gives them permission to stop trying to win the whole spelling game with their ears alone.

And it gives you, the parent, a calm script that fits the method you already have.

We are still going to do HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE.

But now BUILD sometimes includes: “Find the family piece first.”

Let’s use aud, because it is such a clean family and it shows up in real school words quickly.

Aud means hear.

You already met it in the previous section: audio, audible, audience, audition, auditorium.

Your child may notice something that feels unfair at first. The sound at the beginning shifts. In one word it sounds like aw. In another it sounds more like ah. In another it gets swallowed into a schwa. And yet the spelling stays a-u-d.

That is the point. That is the promise English is making on the meaning layer: “This is the hearing family.”

So here is how you teach it without turning it into a lecture.

Start at the table the way you always start: in the air.

Parent: “Word is audio.”
Child: “Audio.”
Parent: “Say it again.”
Child: “Audio.”
Parent: “Tap it.”

Depending on age, you might get something like /aw/ /d/ /ee/ /oh/ or your child may tap more loosely. That's okay. With morphology words, tapping is still useful, but it's not always as tidy as CVC words. You're listening for effort and for whether they can hold the sounds in order.

Then you do the new move.

Parent: "This word has a root. The root is aud. It means hear. In this family, we keep aud spelled a-u-d. Let's build aud first."

Now you write or tile aud as a chunk. You are deliberately choosing to anchor spelling to meaning before you ask your child to juggle the rest.

Then you add what comes after it.

Parent: "Now we add io. We will spell it like this: aud-io."

You are not trying to solve every letter choice in audio by rules your child hasn't learned yet. You are giving the most valuable piece: the stable ancestor.

Then you do what Sound First always insists on.

Clear it. Retrieve it. Write it.

Parent: "Sweep it back. Now write audio."

That clear-and-write step matters even more with morphology, because older kids can become very good at recognizing and very bad at recalling. Writing from recall is what turns "I've seen that" into "I can produce that."

Now you expand the family with a word sum.

Parent: "Now let's build audition. Listen: audition."
Child: "Audition."
Parent: "Do you hear aud at the front?"
Child: "Yes."
Parent: "Good. That's our root again. Here's the word sum."

You write:

aud + ition -> audition

If you're thinking, "Wait, I thought we said ion," you're noticing the exact

reason this is worth teaching slowly. Many words that end in the /shun/ sound are spelled with tion or sion (Chapter 7.3), but audition is not exactly the same build as action. Audition has ition as the ending chunk, and your child will meet that pattern in words like addition. The spelling stays consistent in that cluster.

You don't need to turn this into a spelling debate. You just teach what the word uses and connect it to what they already know: stable ending chunks.

Parent: "Remember how action uses the /shun/ chunk? This word has a /shun/ ending too, but it's a slightly different chunk: ition. We're going to treat it as a chunk the way we treated tion and sion."

Then you build it.

HEAR: "audition"
SAY: "audition"
TAP: enough to hold it, even if it's imperfect
BUILD: aud plus ition
WRITE: audition

If your child writes odishun, this is where your new lens changes the emotional temperature.

Instead of, "No, that's wrong," you can say, "That is a good sound spelling. You heard it. Now we're going to upgrade it to the family spelling. This is the aud family, so we keep a-u-d. And this ending is ition."

This is exactly the correction style you used in Chapter 7 when you said, "You heard /t/. Good listening. We spell past tense with e d." Same pattern. Same respect. Just a different layer.

Now let's go to audience, because it's a word kids see everywhere and often spell in wildly reasonable ways.

Parent: "Word is audience."
Child: "Audience."
Parent: "What does it mean?"
Child: "People watching."
Parent: "Right. People who listen or watch. It belongs to the hear family. So what root do we expect at the front?"
Child: "Aud."
Parent: "Yes. Let's write the word sum."

aud + ience -> audience

You do not have to explain ience deeply. Treat it as the ending chunk for this word, the way you treated ture and ous and sure as chunks that show up often. Your child's job right now is to keep the ancestor stable and practice the whole word through retrieval.

Build aud. Add ience. Clear. Write.

Now we climb to the word in the title of this section: auditorium.

This is where many older kids, even strong readers, start guessing because the word feels long and schoolish. But when you build it as a word sum, it becomes almost disappointingly logical.

An auditorium is a place for hearing. That's the meaning. The building itself is designed for listening.

So the first move is not "sound it out harder." The first move is "find the ancestor."

Parent: "Word is auditorium."
Child: "Auditorium."
Parent: "What word part do you hear at the front?"
Child: "Aud."
Parent: "Yes. And what does aud mean?"
Child: "Hear."
Parent: "Good. So we already know the first three letters. We are going to keep them stable because this word belongs to the aud family."

Now write the word sum. You can keep it simple:

aud + itorium -> auditorium

If you want to be a little more precise for an older child who enjoys structure, you can split it further into pieces they may recognize later in other words:

audit + orium -> auditorium

Because audit is also a real word in the family: an audit is an official listening or examination of accounts. The meaning connection can be a fun "Oh!" moment for older kids, and it strengthens spelling because now auditorium is not just aud plus a foggy ending. It is audit plus orium, and audit is anchored.

You don’t have to over-teach that on day one. But you can use it as a ladder if your child is ready.

Parent: “Do you know the word audit?”
Child: “Like taxes?”
Parent: “Yes. It’s the same root family. So auditorium is built from audit plus orium. We keep that base spelling because the family stays visible.”

Now do the Sound First work that makes it stick.

Parent: “Tap auditorium slowly.”

They might tap something like /aw/ /d/ /i/ /t/ /or/ /ee/ /u/ /m/. It won’t be perfect, and it doesn’t have to be. This is not a phonology exam. Tapping here is about keeping your child inside the method, so they don’t drift into “I’ll just write some letters and hope.”

Then BUILD: start with aud (or audit if you chose that route), then add the rest as the ending chunk you’ve decided to teach today.

Then clear the tiles and make them retrieve.

Parent: “Sweep it back. Now write auditorium.”

If your child balks, this is where you remind them of something you established back in Chapter 2: we do hard things in steps. We do not do them by willpower.

Parent: “You don’t have to hold the whole word in your head at once. Hold the parts. First, write aud. Now write itorium.”

And then, once it’s written, you bring meaning back in for the older learner, because meaning is the hook that makes morphology worth it.

Parent: “Circle aud. That’s the ancestor. It means hear. That’s why it stays.”

Now, a practical question: how does this fit into your 15-minute day without turning spelling into a vocabulary course?

You keep it small and you keep it family-based, like everything else in Sound First.

Pick one root family for a week. Aud is perfect.

Day 1: audio, audible

Day 2: audience
Day 3: audition
Day 4: auditorium
Day 5: mix and retrieve, maybe one short dictated sentence: “The audience was silent.” or “We sat in the auditorium.”

Each day, you write one word sum together before you build, just like a quick blueprint. Then you build with tiles or on paper. Then you clear and write from recall.

And here is the quiet power move: you do not treat the word sum as decoration. You treat it as the reason certain letters are non-negotiable.

Your child may still need practice to remember whether audience ends with ce or se. That’s normal. But they no longer have permission to float away from aud. The ancestor pins the word down.

This is where older kids, especially the ones who can read but spell unpredictably, start to change. They stop approaching long words like a gamble. They start approaching them like builds.

They still tap. They still choose phonograms. They still apply rules. But now, when sound alone would tempt them into a plausible misspelling, they have a deeper question to ask during BUILD:

“What family is this word in, and what spelling does that family keep?”

That question is the beginning of real spelling maturity.

And it is exactly what word sums are for.

Once you’ve built a few word sums, something changes in the way your child looks at unfamiliar words.

Before, a long word was a wall. A lot of letters, a lot of pressure, and the old reflex to either guess or avoid it entirely.

Now, a long word starts to look like a trail of recognizable parts.

And that is where morphology quietly becomes more than spelling support. It becomes vocabulary support.

This matters because around nine and up, your child’s school world expands fast. Science and history bring in new terms. Reading jumps into richer chapter books. Writing assignments start asking for “stronger word choice.” A child who can spell jumped and wanted is suddenly being

asked to understand and use words like predict, inspect, invisible, transport, and conclude.

Parents often feel like vocabulary is a separate subject. Flashcards. Word-of-the-week lists. Definitions copied from a dictionary that nobody remembers on Tuesday.

But the same Sound First promise that rescued spelling can rescue vocabulary: no guessing, no fog, no memorizing without hooks.

Word origins give hooks.

Not fancy, museum-style hooks. Practical ones your child can grab while reading and writing.

Here is the core idea in kitchen-table language:

When you learn the meaning of a root, prefix, or suffix, you can understand and spell more words than you've ever been explicitly taught.

And because you are still running HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE, you are not just learning what the word means. You are learning how it is built.

That combination is powerful.

Let's start with something you already did in the last section: aud.

You anchored audio, audible, audience, audition, auditorium to one ancestor. "Aud means hear." You used a word sum to keep the spelling stable even when the sound at the front shifted slightly.

Now notice what happens when your child meets a new aud word in a book, maybe one you didn't teach.

"auditory"

They may not know it, but they can do something better than guessing. They can recognize the family.

You can make this moment simple and satisfying.

Parent: "You found a new word. Let's not panic. Do you see aud at the front?"
Child: "Yeah."
Parent: "What does aud mean?"
Child: "Hear."

Parent: “So this word has something to do with hearing. Let’s read the sentence and see if that fits.”

This is vocabulary instruction that feels like detective work, not homework. It also changes spelling behavior later. When your child tries to write auditory, they are far less likely to drift into odd- or awd- because aud is now pinned by meaning.

That’s the win: meaning makes spelling stickier, and spelling makes meaning more visible.

Now, you do not need to turn every reading session into a full word study lesson. In fact, please don’t. The goal is not to interrupt stories constantly. The goal is to create small, high-impact moments where your child learns, “I can figure words out.”

So here is a simple way to use word origins without losing your mind or your place in the book.

The three-question “origin pause” (thirty seconds, tops)

When a word looks big, your child asks what it means, or your child misreads it, you pause and ask:

1. Do we recognize a prefix at the front?
2. Do we recognize a root in the middle?
3. Do we recognize a suffix or ending chunk at the end?

You are not asking for perfect answers. You are teaching your child where to look.

And if the child recognizes even one part, that is enough to pull meaning out of the fog.

Take a root family many kids meet early in school vocabulary: spect, meaning look.

You introduced it in 8.1 as a good starter family. Now watch what it does for vocabulary.

inspect
respect
spectator
inspectors
inspection

A child can meet inspect in a science lesson: “Inspect the plant.” They can meet spectator in a sports article. They can meet respect in character education. These words can feel unrelated until you point the flashlight at the ancestor.

At the table, you can keep it light.

Parent: “Spect means look. A spectator is someone who looks at a game. Inspect means look into something carefully. Respect is a little more abstract, but it comes from the same idea: to look again, to look back with regard.”

If your child is the eye-rolling type, you don’t need to be poetic. You can keep it blunt:

Parent: “Spect equals look. That will help you.”

Then you do what Sound First always does. You build at least one word so this doesn’t float away as trivia.

HEAR: “inspect”
SAY: “inspect”
TAP: /in/ /spect/ (and yes, they can tap it by syllables here; tapping older words is allowed to be chunkier)
BUILD: in + spect
WRITE: inspect

This is where your earlier work with prefixes and suffixes starts paying rent. In is a prefix your child sees constantly. Spect is the stable root chunk. You are giving your child the feeling of control: “I can assemble this.”

And notice what else you are doing: you are teaching a reading strategy and a spelling strategy at the same time.

Now let’s connect this to Chapter 7, because the continuity matters.

Back in 7.3 you taught ending chunks like tion and sion as stable spellings for a common ending sound. You told your child, truthfully, “Sometimes we can predict it from the base word, and sometimes we learn it by seeing and using the word.”

Word origins increase how often you can predict, because they help you find the base.

For example:

inspect becomes inspection

That is spect again, with a suffix chunk you already taught: tion. And suddenly inspection isn't just "one of those long school words." It's inspect plus ion. Even better, it carries meaning.

An inspection is the act of looking into something carefully.

So when your child writes inspecshun, you don't need a lecture. You run your normal correction script: praise the sound work, then upgrade the spelling with a known chunk.

Parent: "You spelled it the way it sounds. Good tapping. This word is inspect plus ion, and the /shun/ chunk here is tion. Let's rebuild it."

This is why the layers of the book are in the order they are. Phonograms gave keys. Rules gave decision tools. Suffixing gave the machine. Now morphology gives the blueprint.

Vocabulary grows the same way spelling grows: from families, not lists.

A parent-friendly way to choose which origins to teach

You do not need to teach Latin. You do not need a giant root workbook. You need a handful of high-utility families that show up everywhere in real school language.

Here is a practical way to pick them.

Choose one root family each week, but choose it from your child's actual life.

If your child is in a unit about space, you might choose port (carry) and talk about transport, portable, import, export. If your child is reading mysteries, you might choose spect (look) and build inspect, suspect, perspective. If your child is in music, you might choose aud (hear) and build audio, auditorium.

Then you add prefixes that show up constantly and make the meanings click fast.

re means again
un means not
pre means before
sub means under

trans means across
con means with or together

These are simple, high-frequency meaning tools.

You can make this feel surprisingly fun with one kitchen-table game that takes two minutes and uses no materials.

Parent: “If I tell you the parts, can you tell me what kind of meaning the word might have?”

Try these:

transport: trans (across) + port (carry)
Parent: “So transport is…?”
Child: “Carry across?”
Parent: “Yes. Move something from one place to another.”

submarine: sub (under) + marine (sea)
Parent: “So a submarine is…?”
Child: “Under the sea.”
Parent: “Exactly.”

predict: pre (before) + dict (say)
Parent: “So predict is…?”
Child: “Say before?”
Parent: “Yes. Say ahead of time. Guess based on clues.”

That last one is a perfect example of vocabulary and spelling holding hands. Dict shows up in dictionary, dictate, dictator, verdict. Once your child learns dict as a family piece meaning say, those words stop feeling random.

And spelling improves because your child starts to expect the stable chunk.

When they go to write dictionary, they’re less likely to write dikshunary if they can see dict plus ion plus ary as a build, even if you don’t fully analyze every suffix. They have anchors.

How to keep this from becoming a lecture

The trap with word origins is enthusiasm. Once you see the pattern, you want to explain it all. But your child still has a brain with limits, and your 15-minute day still has a timer.

So keep it on the Sound First rails:

One family.
A few words.
Build and write at least one.
Stop.

A good weekly set for an older child might be five to eight words total, taught across several days. And each day, you still do the same thing that made spelling stick back in Chapter 2: you clear the tiles and write from recall.

Because vocabulary understanding without retrieval is like reading about swimming. Helpful, but not the same as getting in the water.

Here is a simple week using one root that is a vocabulary powerhouse: port (carry).

Day 1: port, portable
Word sum: port + able -> portable
Parent: “Portable means able to be carried.”

Day 2: transport
Word sum: trans + port -> transport
Parent: “Carry across. Move from place to place.”

Day 3: import, export
Word sums: im + port -> import; ex + port -> export
Parent: “Import brings in. Export sends out.”

Day 4: report
Word sum: re + port -> report
Parent: “Bring back information.”

Day 5: Mix and retrieve. One dictated sentence: “We export apples.” or “I wrote a report.”

Notice what you are doing here. You are giving your child academic vocabulary they will actually meet, and you are making the spellings easier by keeping the family chunk stable.

This also helps with a common older-kid problem: vague writing.

When a child knows that report means “bring back information,” they use it more confidently. When they see transport as “carry across,” they can picture it, and words that can be pictured are words that stick.

When sound conflicts with spelling, origins reduce the frustration

There is one more reason this matters, and it connects directly to what you promised in Chapter 6: English protects sound, meaning, and history.

Older kids start asking the “Why is that letter there?” questions more aggressively, because they can tell the system is deeper than they were taught.

Word origins give you calm answers.

Why is there a g in sign?
Because of the family: signal, signature, design.

Why is there a b in doubt?
Because of its history and family connections (and yes, English carries souvenirs).

You don’t need to be a historian to use that answer well. You just need to treat it like a real reason, not a shrug.

Parent: “That letter helps connect the word to its family. English keeps meaning visible.”

This is the exact opposite of the “just memorize it” message. It tells your child, “The system has reasons, and you can learn them.”

And that belief change is, in many families, the biggest vocabulary gain of all.

Because once a child believes words are buildable, they read more bravely. They attempt harder words. They ask better questions. They write with more precision. They stop avoiding.

So as you move forward, keep the method steady. The five steps do not disappear in morphology. They become the routine that makes morphology usable.

You still HEAR the word clearly.
You still SAY it.
You still TAP enough to keep the sounds in order.
You still BUILD, but now you build with family pieces first when it helps.
You still WRITE from recall, because that is what makes knowledge stick.

And when your child meets a new word tomorrow and says, “What does

that mean?” you will have a new kind of answer.

Not a definition to copy.

A set of parts to build. A story of an ancestor. A reason the word says what it says.

That is how vocabulary expands in a way that sticks, because it’s the same promise you’ve been keeping all along.

Sound first.

Then structure.

Then meaning.

Chapter 9: Two Roads, Both Good: Spelling With and Without Reading

By now you have a lot of power at your kitchen table.

You can take a word apart before the pencil moves. You can build it with tiles, clear it, and make your child retrieve it. You can coach rules without turning spelling into a courtroom. You can explain why miss has two s's, why have has a silent e, why jumped ends with ed even when it sounds like /t/, and why action is not acshun. If your child is older, you can even anchor a whole family with aud and watch long words stop feeling like walls.

So why does Chapter 9 exist?

Because there is a real, practical fork that shows up once the method is working: Do you tie spelling practice to your child's reading, or do you practice spelling as its own track for a while?

Both roads work. Both roads can be sound-first. Both roads can lead to strong spelling. And choosing well matters, not because one road is "correct," but because children are not identical machines. They have different temperaments, different histories with school, different levels of reading ease, different levels of spelling shame, and different tolerances for cognitive load.

This is the chapter where we stop pretending every child should march in the same pacing plan.

You are going to choose the path that fits your child right now. You can switch later. Switching is not failure. It is good coaching.

Here are the two roads, stated simply.

Road A: Spelling with reading. You use your child's reading as the primary source of words and patterns for spelling practice. You pull words from books, from school reading, from passages they are actually consuming. You treat spelling as the writing partner to reading.

Road B: Spelling apart from reading. You practice spelling in a controlled sequence that is not dependent on what your child happens to be reading. You still read, obviously. But spelling practice stays on its own track so it can be simpler, more direct, and less emotionally tangled.

Neither road abandons HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE. The difference is

where the words come from, and how much the reading experience is driving the spelling experience.

If you have a child who reads easily and spells unpredictably, Road A often feels natural. If you have a child who struggles with reading and spelling, Road B is often kinder and more effective at first. But those are tendencies, not laws.

To choose wisely, you're going to look at three things: your child's reading load, your child's spelling error type, and your child's emotional temperature.

First: your child's reading load

Reading costs mental energy. Some kids pay that cost easily and still have change left over. Other kids pay it with everything they have.

If your child reads with ease, it is often efficient to braid spelling into reading because the words are already alive in their mind. They are seeing them, hearing them in their head, meeting them in meaningful sentences. That gives spelling more hooks.

You see this especially with the morphology ascent from Chapter 8. When an older child is reading real books, roots and families start appearing everywhere, and your kitchen table can become a place where you catch and keep those families on purpose.

If your child is reading a book and stumbles on "audible," you can do that thirty-second origin pause you learned: "Do you see aud? What does aud mean?" Then later, in spelling time, you can build audible, audience, auditorium as a set. Reading supplied the spark. Spelling practice captures it.

But if reading itself is hard, tying spelling tightly to reading can overload the system. A child who is decoding slowly is already using most of their attention just to get through the line. If you then ask them to also notice spelling patterns, analyze endings, remember a rule, and write accurately, you may be asking them to do too many hard things at once.

That is not laziness. That is cognitive load.

For that child, Road B is often a relief. It says, "We will strengthen spelling in a calm, controlled way, and we will let reading be its own separate effort for now." In practice, that means you choose words that match what you have taught: short vowels, then silent e, then FLOSS, then suffixing, then ending chunks. You can still celebrate reading wins. You

just don’t make reading the engine that drives spelling practice.

Second: your child’s spelling error type

Think back to the diagnostic questions you learned in Chapter 6.3. When your child misspells, the question is not “Why can’t you remember?” It is “Which layer is breaking down?”

Here is how that helps you choose a road.

If most errors are segmentation errors, missing sounds, reversed sounds, dropped sounds, Road B usually wins at first. That is Chapter 3 work. That is tap-before-pencil work. Those skills grow best with controlled, short words and quick wins. Pulling random words from a chapter book may accidentally throw your child into clusters they are not ready for, and then you lose the calm confidence you worked so hard to build.

If most errors are phonogram choice errors, like the child can hear /ai/ but keeps picking i instead of ai or a_e, either road can work, but Road B gives you clean repetition. You can decide, “This week we practice ai and ay,” and build ten words that reinforce that choice without relying on what shows up in a book.

If most errors are rule or signal errors, like forgetting to double in hopped, forgetting to drop silent e in hoping, forgetting the silent e after v in have, Road A can work beautifully if the child is seeing these words in reading. The rule becomes something you notice in real language. The child sees it, then uses it. That is how rules become automatic.

If most errors are word-family errors, those “I can hear it, but spelling still surprises me” errors you saw in Chapter 8, Road A becomes especially powerful for older kids. Reading supplies families. Writing uses families. You begin to see spelling not as isolated words but as a network. That is exactly what morphology is for.

But here is the caution: even with older kids, if the reading material is too advanced, Road A can turn spelling time into constant triage. You will spend your whole session explaining instead of retrieving. The result is that the child understands, nods, and still can’t spell it tomorrow because the mapping work did not happen. Remember the line from Chapter 6.2: the explanation is not the lesson. The retrieval is the lesson.

Road A works only if you still protect time for building, clearing, and writing from recall. If you cannot get to retrieval because the words are too big, Road B will actually produce faster spelling growth, even for a great reader.

Third: your child’s emotional temperature

This is the one parents skip, and it is the one that most often decides whether you keep going consistently.

Some children love connecting spelling to reading. It feels grown-up. It feels relevant. They like catching a word in the wild and bringing it to the table. They like feeling, “This is my word.”

Other children feel exposed when spelling gets tied to reading. If they have a history of being corrected while reading aloud, they may already associate reading with performance and failure. If you then add spelling correction on top of that, you can accidentally trigger avoidance. The child learns, “Any time I try, I get fixed.”

Sound First has been carefully undoing that. Your child has been learning that mistakes are procedural, not personal. Road choice should protect that emotional progress.

So ask yourself a plain question: When my child reads, do they relax, or do they brace?

If they relax, Road A is likely safe.

If they brace, start with Road B. Let spelling be the place where they feel competent again. Then, later, you can gently bridge to Road A by pulling only one or two words from reading each week, words you know they can succeed with using the tools they already have.

A simple decision tool: three child profiles

If you want a fast way to choose, here are three common profiles that show up in real homes. Your child may be a blend. That’s normal.

Profile 1: The racing reader, fragile speller

This child reads chapter books quickly, understands stories, and uses big spoken vocabulary. But spelling is inconsistent. They can spell a word one day and miss it the next. They often spell by vibe. They are surprised that there are rules, and they may resist “babyish” practice like tapping.

For this child, Road A is often motivating, but you must keep it structured. Use reading to harvest words, then bring them back to the five steps. This child especially needs clear-and-write retrieval because recognition is already strong. Their weakness is recall.

A good plan is: two or three words from their current reading each week, chosen for one pattern you are targeting. If they just saw “motion,” “nation,” and “vacation,” that is a perfect opportunity to reinforce the tion chunk from Chapter 7.3.

Profile 2: The struggling reader, struggling speller

This child uses a lot of effort to decode. Reading may be slow, tiring, or emotionally charged. Spelling errors often show missing sounds, muddled vowel choices, and guesses based on partial information.

For this child, Road B is usually kinder and faster at first. Keep spelling practice controlled and short: CVC words, then FLOSS, then silent e, then simple suffixing with Double, Drop, Change, then -ed. Build automaticity through success.

Do not worry that you are “not connecting it to real reading enough.” You are building the code. As the code strengthens, reading will often get easier too. Then you can start blending the roads later.

Profile 3: The capable student who hates spelling

This child may read fine and write fine, but spelling has become a fight. They are tired of being corrected. They may rush, avoid, or argue. They may have internalized “I’m just not a spelling person.”

For this child, road choice is about trust.

Often, Road B is the quickest way to lower the emotional temperature because it feels like training, not judging. It is you and them on the same side of a system. You can pick patterns with high payoff and show immediate wins, which rebuilds identity.

Then, once the child believes spelling is solvable, Road A becomes a powerful way to transfer skill into real writing, because now the child does not experience a book as a minefield of potential embarrassment. They experience it as a source of words they can build.

What you are choosing, really

You are not choosing whether your child will learn to spell.

You are choosing the most supportive environment for practice right now.

Road A says, “We will learn spelling through the words you meet in real

text.”
Road B says, “We will learn spelling through a carefully chosen sequence so your brain can automate the code.”

Both are honest. Both are sound-first. Both protect the same non-negotiables: tapping before writing, building before the pencil, and retrieval that makes mapping stick.

And here is the most important permission in this subchapter.

You can choose one road for three months and then switch.

In fact, many families do best with a season of Road B to build the foundations, then a gradual shift toward Road A as reading becomes more fluent and as morphology becomes more relevant.

Your job is not to pick the perfect road forever.

Your job is to keep your child moving, fifteen minutes at a time, in a way that builds confidence instead of burns it.

In the next sections of this chapter, we’re going to talk about pacing for different temperaments, including the child who needs extra repetition and the child who wants to sprint. But for now, you have the core decision.

Look at your child’s reading load.
Look at their error type.
Look at their emotional temperature.

Then choose the road that lets you say, tomorrow, with a calm voice and a clear plan:

“Let’s build some words.”

Most families don’t get stuck because they don’t understand the method anymore. They get stuck because their child is a specific kind of learner, and the “average pacing” advice doesn’t fit.

In real homes, two profiles show up again and again, often in the same family.

The struggling speller: the child who works hard, taps slowly, and still loses sounds or reverses them under pressure. The child who has a history of red marks, sighs, and “We practiced this.”

The racing reader: the child who inhales books and uses big words in conversation, but spells like the word is a guess-and-check game. The child who says, “I know this,” and then writes it three different ways in one paragraph.

Both children can become strong spellers. But they need different kinds of support from you, even though you are using the same five steps.

The key is to stop treating these as personality flaws.

A struggling speller is not lazy.
A racing reader is not careless.

They are both telling you something about where the system is breaking down.

The struggling speller usually needs more stability in the sound layer and more repetition with small, controlled words so the brain can build automatic mapping.

The racing reader usually needs fewer words, more retrieval, and more insistence on process, because recognition is strong but recall is fragile.

Same method. Different coaching.

Let’s start with the struggling speller.

What the struggling speller needs most: slower upstream work, smaller targets, more wins

If your child is a struggling speller, your most important job is to protect the sound-first order.

HEAR. SAY. TAP. BUILD. WRITE.

Not “try it, then we’ll fix it.”

Not “just sound it out in your head.”

Not “write it and see if it looks right.”

Those phrases are poison for a child whose sound map is still forming. They force the child to do the hardest part silently and alone. That is exactly when sounds get dropped, swapped, or smeared together.

So for this child, you become almost stubborn about upstream.

You will feel tempted to rescue. You will want to “help” by saying the letters, or by letting them write and then correcting. But remember what you already learned in Chapter 6.1: we don’t fix spelling downstream anymore. We return upstream.

Here is what that looks like in a moment that used to turn into a fight.

Your child writes jumpt.

Old model: “No, it’s jumped. You forgot the e and the d again.”

Sound First model: “Tap jumped.”

Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/ /t/.”

Parent: “You heard /t/. Good listening. Past tense is spelled e d. Fix the ending.”

That script works for any child, but it is especially important for struggling spellers because it protects them from shame. It also keeps the correction connected to a decision tool, not to you as the judge.

Now, here is the pacing truth for struggling spellers.

They do not need more words. They need more loops.

A loop is one word, done correctly, through the steps, with retrieval.

If your child needs five minutes to do three words well, that is a successful session.

Because the point is mapping, and mapping happens through accurate retrieval, not through volume.

So you shorten the list and deepen the practice. This is where Road B, spelling apart from reading, is often kinder. You choose words that let the child succeed with the tools they have today.

You build clusters that reinforce one decision at a time.

Short vowel plus FLOSS: miss, mess, hill, tell
Short vowel plus ck: back, duck, rock
Silent e job 1: cap, cape; hop, hope
Double and drop: hopping, hoping
-ed: jumped, played, wanted

Notice what you are doing: you are letting the child experience the code keeping its promises.

And you are letting their brain build a reliable map before you ask it to handle the wild variety of real text spelling.

A practical routine adjustment that helps struggling spellers

For this child, add one extra habit inside TAP that will feel small to you but huge to them: re-tap in reverse.

Parent: “Tap it forward.”
Child: “/m/ /i/ /s/.”
Parent: “Tap it backward.”
Child: “/s/ /i/ /m/.”

This forces the brain to hold the sequence, not just the pieces. Many struggling spellers can hear sounds, but the order collapses under load. Reverse tapping strengthens sequencing without adding new content.

Another adjustment: keep tiles longer, delay pencil just a little more.

Struggling spellers often rush to pencil because pencil feels like “doing school.” But pencil also increases the load: fine motor, spacing, letter formation, and often anxiety about being judged. Tiles allow more thinking with less strain.

So if you notice your child is accurate with tiles but falls apart when writing, don’t interpret that as “tiles are a crutch.”

Interpret it as “writing load is still too high.”

Your fix is simple: do one more clear-and-rebuild before writing.

Build the word. Clear it. Rebuild it. Clear it. Then write it.

Two retrievals before pencil.

That is not babying. That is training. And it works.

Finally, protect the emotional temperature.

Struggling spellers live with a constant background noise of “I’m behind.” Even if you never say it, they feel it.

So you measure progress differently.

Progress is not “How many words did you spell right today?”
Progress is “Did you tap the sounds without guessing?”
Progress is “Did you apply the rule when I cued it?”
Progress is “Did you fix it upstream without tears?”

Those are real wins. Those are the wins that compound.

Now let’s talk about the racing reader.

What the racing reader needs most: fewer words, stricter process, and real retrieval

The racing reader is often the child who makes parents doubt the method.

Because this child can sound smart. They can read big words. They can explain ideas. And yet they spell with the confidence of a person walking through fog.

They will tell you, “I know how to spell that,” and then write definatly, or becuz, or differant, or bussiness.

And because they are competent in so many areas, adults often respond in one of two unhelpful ways.

Either we get sharp: “You’re not even trying.”

Or we shrug: “Spelling just isn’t your thing.”

Sound First gives you a third option: you insist on process, not effort.

Racing readers often have a strong visual recognition system. They have seen the words a thousand times. They can recognize correct spelling on a multiple-choice test. But recall is a different skill, and recall is what writing demands.

So your job is to stop letting recognition masquerade as spelling ability.

This is why the clear-and-write step is non-negotiable for racing readers.

They can build a word correctly while looking at tiles and still not be able to write it from memory. That is normal for this profile. Recognition is not mapping.

Mapping is retrieval.

So you do something that feels almost too simple, but is exactly what their brain needs.

You reduce the number of words, and you increase the number of times they retrieve each word.

Three words, written twice from recall, beats ten words written once.

And you do not let them skip TAP because they “already know it.”

This child is the one who will try to jump straight to WRITE and then argue that it should count.

You keep it calm.

Parent: “In this house, we tap before pencil. Show me the sounds.”

Not as punishment. As structure.

A racing reader’s biggest risk is spelling by vibe. Your method is the antidote.

How to use Road A without getting swallowed by too-hard words

For racing readers, Road A, spelling with reading, can be extremely motivating. They like bringing you words from books. They like feeling grown-up. They like catching patterns like tion in the wild.

But Road A has a trap: you can end up collecting impressive words and never mapping them.

So set a rule that protects retrieval.

If a word takes more than two minutes to build, it is not today’s spelling word.

Write it on a “Later List” and move on.

That is not avoidance. That is respecting the purpose of spelling time. Spelling time is for mapping, not for vocabulary touring.

Instead, harvest words that match one pattern you are targeting.

If you are working on the /shun/ ending, pull motion, action, station, and

do the quick base-word check you learned in Chapter 7.3.

If you are working on -ed, pull a few past tense verbs from their reading and sort them by sound: /t/, /d/, /id/. Then build two and write them from recall.

If you are working on roots for an older racing reader, this is where Chapter 8 becomes a superpower. Because racing readers often love word families once they see them. It feels like a shortcut, but it is actually structure.

You can say, “You just saw audience in your book. That’s aud, the hear family. Let’s build audio, audience, auditorium this week.”

Now spelling time feels connected to their reading life, but still controlled.

The coaching tone that keeps racing readers from turning it into a debate

Racing readers are often quick thinkers and quick talkers. If you invite debate, you will spend your fifteen minutes negotiating instead of mapping.

So you keep your language procedural.

“Tap it.”
“Build it.”
“Clear it.”
“Write it.”

And when they resist, you don’t argue about motivation. You return to the promise of the method.

Parent: “This is how spelling sticks. We’re training recall.”

If they say, “But I know it,” you give them a kind, firm test that doesn’t shame them.

Parent: “Great. Show me. Build it, clear it, write it.”

If they can write it, wonderful. Move on.
If they cannot, you have your answer, and you have it without a fight.

One more note that matters for both profiles

Struggling spellers and racing readers often live in the same classroom, get the same spelling lists, and end up with the same conclusion: spelling

is either a talent you have or you don’t.

Sound First is undoing that belief.

For the struggling speller, you prove it by making the code small enough to master, one loop at a time.

For the racing reader, you prove it by requiring the process that turns recognition into production, one retrieval at a time.

And here is the quiet, encouraging truth that will keep you steady as a parent: both children often start looking the same after a few months of consistent practice.

Not identical. But calmer.

They both pause before pencil.
They both tap without being asked as often.
They both start using your cues as their own inner script.

“Short vowel, double it.”
“Silent e, drop it.”
“Past tense is spelled e d.”
“That ending chunk is tion.”
“This word is in the aud family.”

That is the goal.

Not perfect spelling overnight.

A child who knows what to do next, and believes the system will help them do it.

If you have made it this far, you have already done something most families never do.

You stopped asking, “How do I get my child to remember?” and started asking, “How do I help my child build?”

You learned to keep the pencil down until the sounds are out. You learned to coach inside BUILD instead of correcting downstream. You learned to treat “wrong” as information: a missing sound, a missing key, a missed rule, or a word family that needs an anchor.

So why are we talking about pacing?

Because even when the method is solid, parents still get discouraged for one predictable reason: progress does not look like a straight line.

It looks like a spiral.

Your child learns FLOSS, spells miss correctly all week, and then writes mis in a sentence the next Monday.

Your child nails hopped and hoping at the table, then writes hopeing in a paragraph.

Your older child understands that aud means hear, but still spells audience as awdience the first time they try it in a hurry.

If you interpret those moments as “It didn’t stick,” you will start changing programs, changing routines, raising your voice, or quietly giving up.

If you interpret those moments correctly, you will stay calm and keep going.

Here is the truth that makes pacing work: spelling skill has two stages.

Stage one is learning. Your child can do it with support, with tiles, with your cues.

Stage two is transfer. Your child can do it in real writing, under time pressure, while thinking about ideas and punctuation and handwriting and whether the dog is about to steal their snack.

Transfer is slower than learning. That is not a flaw in your child. That is how brains work.

This is why a “good pace” in Sound First is not about how many patterns you cover in a month. It is about how reliably your child can retrieve what you have already taught.

You are not building a scrapbook of rules. You are building automatic habits.

So let’s make pacing practical.

What a realistic pace actually looks like

Most families do best with one primary target at a time.

Not one word. One target.

A target might be short vowels with FLOSS doubling.
A target might be silent e doing the long vowel job.
A target might be Double and Drop with ing.
A target might be the three sounds of ed.
A target might be the /shun/ ending chunk, mostly tion, with a first introduction to sion.
For older kids, a target might be one root family like aud for a week.

When you keep the target tight, your child gets enough repetition to form a habit. When you change targets too fast, your child becomes a talented performer at the table and a guesser on paper.

Here is a pacing guideline that works for many children.

For a new target, expect two kinds of days.

Training days: you cue the rule or chunk and your child uses it correctly with your help.
Proof days: your child retrieves it with little or no cueing, writes it from recall, and applies it in a sentence.

If you are mostly having training days, you are not behind. You are still laying the track.
If you are having regular proof days, you can start moving forward.

Parents often ask, “How many words should we do?”

The number is less important than the loop.

A good loop is: build it, clear it, write it from recall. That is one retrieval.

For many children, three to six words in fifteen minutes is plenty, especially if you are writing them from recall and not just building them.

For a struggling speller, it might be two or three words, with two retrievals each.
For a racing reader, it might be three words, written twice, because recall is the weak link.

The pace is not “cover material.” The pace is “build retrieval.”

Patience that has a job, not a vibe

A lot of parenting advice uses the word patience as if it means “be nice while nothing happens.”

That is not what you are doing here.

Sound First patience is active. It has a job.

Patience means you keep returning upstream.
Patience means you run the machine again.
Patience means you give the same calm cue for the same kind of error, even if you gave it yesterday.

When your child writes jumpt, you do not sigh and say, “We practiced this.” You say, “You heard /t/. Good listening. Past tense is spelled e d. Fix the ending.” Then you clear and have them write jumped again.

When your child writes hoppeing, you do not lecture. You say, “What’s the base word?”
“Hope.”
“Does hope end in silent e?”
“Yes.”
“And ing starts with a vowel, so what do we do?”
“Drop the e.”
“Build it. Clear it. Write hoping.”

That is patience with a purpose. It is repetition with dignity.

And here is the part that will keep you steady: those repeats are not wasted. They are the work.

The brain maps through accurate, repeated retrieval. Every time your child fixes a word upstream, you are not just repairing the spelling on the page. You are strengthening the pathway that will eventually make the correct spelling feel like the obvious choice.

How to measure progress without losing your mind

If you measure progress only by whether your child spelled the word right in a sentence, you will feel like you are living in whiplash.

Instead, measure progress in three categories. These are the same layers you learned back in Chapter 6.3, now used as a parent progress chart in your head.

1. Sound progress
Is your child tapping more independently?
Are they missing fewer sounds?
Are they holding sound order more reliably?

You will see this when a child who used to blur jumped now taps /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/ /t/ without your help. Or when a child who used to skip the /n/ in stomp stops skipping it.

2. Decision progress
Is your child starting to use rules and signals without you prompting every time?

This is when you say “miss,” and your child builds m-i-s-s automatically because the FLOSS cue is starting to live in them.
This is when you say “hopping,” and they ask, “Do we double?” before you say anything.
This is when they write have and add the silent e because they remembered “no final v.”

3. Transfer progress
Is your child bringing the process into real writing, even imperfectly?

Transfer progress does not look like perfection. It looks like a pause.

It looks like your child stopping mid-sentence and tapping quietly on their fingers.
It looks like them asking, “Does this need silent e?”
It looks like them circling a word they are unsure about and coming back to it with tiles later, instead of guessing wildly.

Those are signs of maturity. They mean the method is becoming internal.

A child who pauses and checks is closer to strong spelling than a child who writes fast and guesses, even if the guess happens to be right that day.

The two-week rule: when to slow down and when to move on

Here is a simple pacing tool that prevents both rushing and stagnation.

Stay with a target for at least two weeks, unless it is obviously mastered quickly.

Two weeks sounds long, but remember your fifteen-minute day. Two weeks is ten short sessions. Ten sessions is enough for a real pattern to start forming, especially when you keep the word set tight.

If, after two weeks, your child still cannot retrieve the pattern even with heavy cueing, do not speed up. Slow down and simplify.

That might mean you reduce the word difficulty. You go back from discussion to simpler tion words like action and motion.
You move from auditorium back to audio and audible.
You move from wanted back to played and jumped and only then reintroduce /id/.

If, after two weeks, your child can retrieve the pattern in new words with little cueing, you can move forward.

New words matters here. Many children can memorize a small set. That is fine, but it is not the goal. The goal is flexible use.

So you test it gently by offering one unfamiliar word that still fits the pattern.

If you've practiced back, duck, sick, rock, you try check.
If you've practiced hope and make, you try ride.
If you've practiced jumped and helped, you try packed.
If you've practiced action and motion, you try station.

If your child can do it, you are ready to add the next layer.

If not, you did not fail. You learned what needs more loops.

How to keep motivation without bribery or drama

Motivation problems in spelling are often pacing problems wearing a costume.

A child who is overwhelmed looks "unmotivated."
A child who is bored looks "unmotivated."
A child who is asked to do transfer tasks before the training is solid looks "unmotivated."

Your solution is not bigger rewards. Your solution is better calibration.

For the overwhelmed child, shrink the target and increase success.
For the bored child, reduce repetition but increase challenge in a controlled way, like adding a word family or letting them harvest two words from their reading that match the target.
For the child who melts down during writing, increase tile time and do one extra clear-and-rebuild before pencil, because writing load is real.

And keep one promise that you can always keep:

End the session while your child still feels capable.

Not while they are destroyed. Not while you are both grinding your teeth. If you have five minutes left and the next word is going to turn into a fight, stop early and do one easy proof word instead.

“Let’s end with miss.” Or “Let’s end with hope and hoping.” Or for older kids, “Let’s end with audio.”

You are building an identity here, not just a skill.

The kind of progress you are really after

The most valuable progress is not that your child gets a 100 on a spelling test.

It is that your child stops experiencing words as unpredictable.

When your child starts saying things like:
“Short vowel, double it.”
“Silent e, drop it.”
“Past tense is e d.”
“That ending is tion.”
“This is in the aud family.”

That is the sound-first script becoming their own inner coach.

And that is why pacing, patience, and progress belong in this chapter about two roads.

Because whether you are using Road A with reading or Road B apart from reading, you are aiming for the same outcome: a child who can move through English without guessing.

Not fast at first.

But steady.

Fifteen minutes at a time, with a method that keeps working, even on the days when it feels like you are repeating yourself.

You are not repeating yourself. You are laying down a pathway.

And pathways are how spelling sticks.

Chapter 10: The 15-Minute Day: Open-and-Go Spelling at Home

By now you've heard the promise of Sound First in a lot of different outfits.

You've seen it in tiny words where tapping solved the mystery. You've seen it in rules like FLOSS and the jobs of silent E, where spelling stopped being "because I said so" and became "because English is doing something on purpose." You've seen it in suffixing, where Double, Drop, Change turned a pile of changed words into a machine. You've seen it in -ed, where your child's ears were finally treated as trustworthy. And if you have an older child, you've seen it in morphology, where aud held a whole family steady even when the sound shifted.

Now we make it livable.

Because the difference between a method you admire and a method that changes your child's spelling is not how smart it is.

It is whether you can do it tomorrow, at the kitchen table, in fifteen minutes, without printing a hundred pages, without setting up a craft station, and without turning into the spelling police.

This is the daily routine. Zero prep, all progress.

The goal is not to squeeze in more "school." The goal is to build a small habit that produces reliable mapping over time.

Fifteen minutes is long enough to change your child's spelling, and short enough to protect your relationship.

Here is the shape of the routine, and then we'll walk through exactly what to say.

You will do the same four parts every day:

1. Warm-up: wake up the sound system.
2. Teach or review: one small target.
3. Retrieval: clear and write from recall, because that is where mapping happens.
4. Transfer: one tiny sentence or application, so spelling doesn't stay trapped in practice mode.

You can do all of this with tiles, or with paper, or with a mix. Tiles are

ideal when you are teaching something new or when writing load is high. Paper is great when your child is ready to retrieve more quickly. The routine works either way because the routine is not “use tiles.” The routine is “HEAR, SAY, TAP, BUILD, WRITE, then retrieve.”

Before we start, two rules that keep the whole thing calm.

Rule one: Pencil stays down until tapping is done.

You learned this back in Chapter 3, and it remains the spine of everything. This one rule prevents the most common home spelling fight, which is the fight that happens after the child has already written the wrong thing.

If the pencil stays down, you coach upstream. You are on the same side.

Rule two: End on a win.

This is not about being permissive. It is about protecting the habit. A daily routine only works if the child is willing to come back tomorrow. So you do not end with the hardest word and a sigh. You end with a word your child can do correctly with the tools you’ve taught, and you let their brain leave the table with success.

Now let’s run the full fifteen minutes. I’m going to script it the way we’ve been scripting all along: parent lines and child lines, with notes about what you’re doing and why.

Minute 1 to 3: Warm-up, the sound wake-up

Warm-up is not a worksheet. It’s a quick, playful sound check that reminds your child’s brain, “We’re listening first.”

Choose one of these. Rotate them across days.

Option A: Three quick taps

Parent: “We’re going to warm up our ears. Tap the sounds in: ship.”
Child: “/sh/ /i/ /p/.”
Parent: “Tap: chat.”
Child: “/ch/ /a/ /t/.”
Parent: “Tap: jump.”
Child: “/j/ /u/ /m/ /p/.”

You are not teaching anything new here. You are waking up segmentation so the child doesn’t stumble into guessing.

Option B: Change one sound

Parent: “Say hop.”
Child: “Hop.”
Parent: “Now change /h/ to /t/.”
Child: “Top.”
Parent: “Now change /o/ to /a/.”
Child: “Tap.”
Parent: “Now change /p/ to /n/.”
Child: “Tan.”

This is a tiny phonemic warm-up that builds control. It also helps struggling spellers who lose sound order when the pressure rises.

Option C: Reverse tap, once

If your child is a struggling speller, you learned in Chapter 9 that reverse tapping can strengthen sequencing without turning into a big lesson.

Parent: “Tap: miss.”
Child: “/m/ /i/ /s/.”
Parent: “Now tap it backward.”
Child: “/s/ /i/ /m/.”

Do one word. Stop. This is warm-up, not a workout.

Minute 3 to 11: The target, one small thing

This is where parents usually blow the routine by trying to do too much.

Don’t.

Choose one target. Not five.

A target might be: silent E drop with ing. Or doubling with one-vowel-one-consonant. Or the three sounds of -ed. Or the /shun/ ending chunk tion. Or a root family like aud.

You will do two to four words, built and then written from recall. That’s it.

Here’s what this looks like on a day when your target is Double and Drop, which you taught in 7.1.

Parent: “Today we’re working on adding ing. Remember, sometimes we double, sometimes we drop silent e.”

Word 1: hopping

Parent: “Word is hopping.”
Child: “Hopping.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Hop.”
Parent: “Tap hop.”
Child: “/h/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “We’re adding ing. Does hop end with silent e?”
Child: “No.”
Parent: “One vowel, one consonant, one syllable. What do we do?”
Child: “Double.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Your child builds hopping. Then you do the part that makes this method work.

Parent: “Sweep it back. Now write hopping.”

If they spell it wrong, you do not lecture. You simply return upstream.

Parent: “Let’s check the base. What is it?”
Child: “Hop.”
Parent: “One vowel, one consonant. So we…”
Child: “Double.”

Then rebuild, clear, and write again. Calm. Procedural.

Word 2: hoping

Parent: “Word is hoping.”
Child: “Hoping.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Hope.”
Parent: “Tap hope.”
Child: “/h/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “Does hope end in silent e?”
Child: “Yes.”
Parent: “Ing starts with a vowel. What do we do with silent e?”
Child: “Drop it.”
Parent: “Build it.”

Build. Clear. Write hoping.

That is a full target session. Two words. Two clean retrievals. That will do

more for spelling than ten words copied three times.

Here’s what this looks like on a day when your target is -ed, from 7.2.

Parent: “Today we’re working on past tense. Remember, we spell it e d even when it sounds different.”

Pick one /t/ word and one /id/ word, because that contrast is what teaches the system.

jumped

Parent: “Word is jumped.”
Child: “Jumped.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Jump.”
Parent: “Last sound?”
Child: “/p/.”
Parent: “Can you whisper /p/?”
Child: (whispers)
Parent: “So -ed sounds like /t/. But we still spell it e d. Build jump plus ed.”
Then clear and write jumped.

wanted

Parent: “Word is wanted.”
Child: “Wanted.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Want.”
Parent: “Last sound?”
Child: “/t/.”
Parent: “Base ends in /t/. That means -ed says /id/. We still spell it e d. Build want plus ed.”
Clear and write wanted.

If your child writes wantid, you already have your magic sentence: “Great listening. We spell that past tense syllable with e d.”

Here’s what this looks like on an older-child day when your target is a morphology family, like aud from Chapter 8.

Parent: “This week we’re using a root family. Aud means hear. We keep it spelled a-u-d in the whole family.”

Do not turn this into a lecture. Make it a build.

audio

Parent: “Word is audio.”
Child: “Audio.”
Parent: “Tap it slowly.”
Child: (approximate)
Parent: “Build aud first. That’s our family chunk. Now add io.”
Clear. Write audio.

audience

Parent: “Word is audience.”
Child: “Audience.”
Parent: “What does it mean?”
Child: “People watching.”
Parent: “Yes, and listening. So we expect aud at the front. Build aud plus ience.”
Clear. Write audience.

Two words is enough. If you try to do audio, audible, audience, audition, auditorium in one sitting, you will spend the whole time explaining and not enough time retrieving. Remember the line from Chapter 9: the explanation is not the lesson. Retrieval is the lesson.

Minute 11 to 14: Retrieval sprint, the part that makes it stick

Even though you have already cleared and written each word, you now do one quick retrieval sprint. This is where you find out whether the mapping is actually forming.

Parent: “Okay, quick check. No tiles. I’m going to say two words. You write them.”

You dictate the same two words you practiced, or one practiced and one very close cousin that fits the target.

If the target was Double and Drop with ing, you might do hopping and hoping again. Or hopping and dropping, if dropping is within your child’s current phonogram set.

If the target was -ed, you might do jumped and played, or wanted and needed.

If the target was aud, you might do audio and audience.

If your child freezes, that is not failure. That is information. It tells you to stay on the target another day, or to do one more build before writing.

This retrieval sprint is also where racing readers finally get the training they need. They can recognize everything. This forces production.

Minute 14 to 15: One tiny transfer sentence

This is where you prevent the “table-only” problem, the one you named in Chapter 7.2: the child can spell it in isolation but drops it in real writing because cognitive load rises.

So you do one sentence. One. Short.

Parent: “Write: I was hoping.”
Or: “Write: I jumped.”
Or for older kids: “The audience was silent.”

If your child struggles with sentence writing, you can let them build the target word one last time, clear it, and then write the sentence. That is not cheating. That is training transfer without overload.

The zero-prep part that matters most: choosing tomorrow’s target today

If you wait until tomorrow to decide what to do, you will lose the habit.

So at the end of the session, you make a thirty-second note for yourself. Not a plan for the whole month. Just tomorrow.

Ask one question: What kind of error did my child make today?

Did they miss a sound? That is a sound segmentation day tomorrow, smaller words, more tapping.
Did they choose the wrong key for a sound? That is a phonogram practice day.
Did they miss a rule like double or drop? That is the same target again, with fewer words and more retrieval.
Did they drift on a family spelling like aud? That is a morphology anchor day, keep the ancestor non-negotiable.

Write it on a sticky note: “Tomorrow: double with ing. Words: hopping, running.” Or “Tomorrow: -ed /id/ words: wanted, needed.” Or “Tomorrow: aud family: audible, audience.”

That is what zero prep really means. You are not preparing materials. You are preparing your next decision.

And then you are done.

Fifteen minutes.
A warm-up.
One target.
Clear-and-write retrieval.
One sentence.
End on a win.

If you do that most days, something quiet but dramatic happens over a few months.

Your child stops waiting for you to tell them whether a word is right.

They begin to run the inner script you've been building since Chapter 2.

"Tap it."
"Build it."
"Drop the e."
"Double the consonant."
"Past tense is e d."
"That ending is tion."
"This is the aud family."

That is what "all progress" looks like. Not a perfect paper. A child with a process.

And once the process belongs to them, spelling finally stops being a weekly performance and starts being a daily skill.

Even with a good routine, real life will eventually hand you a day when the fifteen minutes feel like pushing a shopping cart with a wobbly wheel.

Your child stalls. You stall. The method is still the method, but something in the system is snagging.

That is normal.

The fix is not to scrap the routine or add more time or order a new program. The fix is to diagnose the stall and apply one small upstream adjustment, the same way you've been doing with spelling itself.

Below are five stalls that show up in real homes, and the simplest, most reliable fixes for each one. Read them like a troubleshooting card you keep in your head. When you hit one, you do not panic. You say, "Oh.

This is that stall.” Then you run the fix.

Stall 1: “I don’t know” before you even start (the freeze)

It looks like this: you say a word, your child’s shoulders rise, and they say, “I don’t know,” or “This is too hard,” before tapping even begins.

This stall is rarely about the word. It is about the child’s history with spelling. The freeze is a protection move. If they say “I can’t,” they can avoid being wrong.

Fix: Shrink the first ask and prove safety, fast.

Your job is to get them moving inside the process again, not to persuade them with a speech.

Parent: “You don’t have to know yet. Just say it.”
Child: “Hopping.”
Parent: “Good. Now tap only the base word: hop.”
Child: “/h/ /o/ /p/.”
Parent: “That’s it. You’re already doing it.”

Notice what you did. You took the whole word off their shoulders and gave them one small step that they could succeed with. Then you keep going, one step at a time.

If your child freezes often, make your warm-up even easier for a week. Do three quick taps on words they can already do. Let the sound system wake up without pressure. Then bring in the target with only one word, not three.

And here is a powerful sentence for older kids who feel embarrassed by “basic” steps like tapping:

Parent: “Tapping is not baby work. It’s what we do so we don’t guess.”

That sentence reframes the routine as a tool, not a judgement.

Stall 2: The child rushes to pencil and guesses (the bypass)

This is the opposite of freezing. You say a word, and your child grabs the pencil like it’s a race, writes something quickly, and then looks at you to see if it “counts.”

This is especially common with racing readers from Chapter 9. They are used to recognition. They want to skip to production and let vibe do the

work.

Fix: Make tapping and building the price of admission.

Do it calmly, like a household rule. You are not arguing about attitude. You are enforcing the process that creates mapping.

Parent: “Pencil down. In this house we tap before pencil. Show me the sounds.”

If they protest, do not negotiate. Give a simple choice that keeps you on the same team.

Parent: “You can tap it on your fingers or tap it on the table. Your choice.”

Then, and this matters, you must protect the clear-and-write step. A racing reader can build correctly while looking at tiles and still not be able to write it from recall. That is not defiance. That is the profile.

So you reduce words and increase retrieval.

Parent: “We’re doing two words today. But you’re writing each one twice, from memory.”

That one change often transforms a bypasser into a mapper, because it removes the option of skating on recognition.

Stall 3: “It worked with tiles, but I can’t write it” (the transfer gap)

Your child builds hopping perfectly. They clear the tiles. Then they write hoping, or hoppeing, or they stare at the paper like the word vanished.

Parents often misread this as stubbornness. It is not. It is cognitive load.

Tiles reduce load. Writing increases it: fine motor, spacing, letter formation, and the emotional weight of permanence. When a child loses accuracy during writing, it means the mapping is not stable enough yet to survive that extra load.

Fix: Add one more retrieval before pencil, and shorten the writing demand.

Instead of Build then Write, you do Build, Clear, Rebuild, Clear, Write.

Yes, it takes an extra minute. It saves ten minutes of frustration.

Parent: “You did it with tiles. Great. Now we’re going to do it one more time with tiles, because we’re training your brain to retrieve it.”
Child: “Again?”
Parent: “Yes. One more build. Then writing will feel easier.”

Then you keep the sentence transfer tiny, like you promised in 10.1. One sentence. Sometimes even half a sentence.

Parent: “Just write: I jumped.”

If your child struggles with handwriting, let spelling time be spelling time. You can even have them write on a whiteboard or in larger letters for a while. The goal is accurate retrieval, not perfect penmanship. You can build handwriting separately. Do not make spelling carry every skill at once.

Stall 4: The child keeps making the same kind of mistake (the loop that won’t close)

This is the one that makes parents sigh: “We did this yesterday.”

Maybe the child keeps writing jumpt. Or keeps forgetting to drop the silent e in hoping. Or keeps changing y to i before ing even though you practiced crying.

First, remember what Chapter 9.3 told you: progress is a spiral. A repeat mistake is not proof that nothing is sticking. It is proof that the skill is still in training stage, not transfer stage.

Second, repeat mistakes are often cueing problems. The child can do it when you prompt, but they aren’t initiating the decision yet.

Fix: Move the decision earlier, and make the child say the rule out loud as a build step.

Not as a chant. As a tool they use at the exact moment they need it.

Take hopped.

Parent: “Word is hopped.”
Child: “Hopped.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Hop.”
Parent: “Before we add ed, what do we check?”
Child: “One vowel, one consonant, one syllable.”
Parent: “And what do we do?”

Child: “Double.”

Then you build. Clear. Write.

Or take hoping.

Parent: “Word is hoping.”
Child: “Hoping.”
Parent: “Base word?”
Child: “Hope.”
Parent: “Before we add ing, what do we check?”
Child: “Silent e.”
Parent: “And silent e before a vowel suffix?”
Child: “Drop it.”

You are training an inner script. The child must practice saying it until they can do it without you.

If the loop still will not close, your fix is not to add more words. Your fix is to make the target smaller.

If your child cannot reliably drop silent e, do not practice five silent-e words. Practice one pair: hop and hope, hopping and hoping. Contrast is powerful. Then stop.

And if you notice your child is forgetting because they are rushing, go back to the rule that keeps the whole method calm: pencil stays down until the sounds and the decision are out. Slow is smooth. Smooth becomes fast later.

Stall 5: The session turns emotional (the meltdown, the fight, the shutdown)

This stall can look dramatic, or quiet. Some children cry. Some get angry. Some go silly. Some stare and stop answering.

When a session becomes emotional, it is almost never because your child hates learning. It is usually one of three things: the work is too hard, the pace is too fast, or the child feels judged.

Sound First is designed to remove judgement, but you are human, and your child is human, and the old school scripts can creep back in under stress.

Fix: Drop difficulty immediately, return to a win, and end early if needed.

This is not “letting them get away with it.” This is protecting the habit and the relationship so you can come back tomorrow.

Here is what it can sound like:

Parent: “I can see this is feeling heavy. We’re going to make it easier.”
Child: “I can’t do it.”
Parent: “You can. But not with that word today. Let’s do one we know.”

Then you choose a proof word that your child can do correctly with confidence. Miss. Hop. Make. Jumped. Audio. Something that lets them leave the table with their dignity intact.

Parent: “Tap miss.”
Child: “/m/ /i/ /s/.”
Parent: “Build it. Clear it. Write it.”
Child: (writes miss)
Parent: “Good. Done for today.”

Ending early is not failure. It is good coaching.

And then, in your thirty-second “tomorrow note,” you write what the emotion was telling you.

If the child melted down during writing, tomorrow you increase tile time and do one fewer word.
If they melted down during a too-hard word from reading, tomorrow you use Road B for a few days: controlled words that match the target.
If they melted down because correction felt like judgement, tomorrow you tighten your correction script back into Sound First language.

“You heard /t/. Good listening. Past tense is spelled e d.”
“You spelled it the way it sounds. Good tapping. Now we upgrade the ending chunk to tion.”

Those sentences keep you on the same side as your child, facing the code together.

The real troubleshooting principle

All five stalls have the same underlying fix: return upstream.

When things wobble, you do not push harder downstream. You do not demand more effort after the guess. You move earlier in the process.

You tap again.

You build again.
You shrink the target.
You add retrieval.
You protect a win.

That is why the fifteen-minute day works. Not because every day is smooth, but because every day has a next right move.

And when you respond to stalls this way, something subtle changes over time.

Your child stops seeing a hard moment as proof they can't spell.

They start seeing it as a signal.

"Oops. I bypassed tapping."
"Oops. I forgot to check silent e."
"Oops. I need one more build before writing."
"Oops. This is a family word. I need the ancestor chunk."

That is not just troubleshooting. That is your child becoming their own coach.

Which is the whole point of Sound First.

At this point you have two things that are rare in home spelling.

You have a method that works, and you have a routine you can actually do.

The next question is the one that decides whether spelling growth keeps compounding quietly for the next year, or whether it fades the moment life gets busy.

"What do we do for practice, without turning our house into a tutoring center?"

This is where the free GSU games come in.

GSU, Georgia State University, has built a set of online literacy games and practice tools that fit the Sound First approach beautifully. They are not a replacement for your fifteen-minute day. They are what you use to keep the code warm between sessions, to add repetition without adding conflict, and to give your child a way to practice that does not always involve you.

Think of them as the treadmill for skills you trained at the table.

Your lessons teach the brain what to do.

Games give the brain enough reps that it starts doing it automatically.

And because you already know the trap of “more time equals more progress” is not true, you’re going to use these games the Sound First way: short, targeted, and tied to your current focus.

How the games fit the Sound First method

If you’ve been reading closely, you’ve already seen the pattern in every successful section of this book.

We do not practice random words.

We practice a target.

A target is one small slice of the code: hearing sounds in order, choosing a phonogram, applying a rule, adding a suffix, choosing an ending chunk, keeping a family spelling stable.

The free GSU games are useful because they can isolate targets and repeat them without turning you into the drill sergeant.

They also solve a practical family problem: the child who needs more loops than you can comfortably provide in one sitting.

In Chapter 9, you learned that struggling spellers need more stability and more loops, and racing readers need fewer words and more retrieval. The games help both profiles.

For the struggling speller, a game can provide extra reps on hearing and matching sounds, without the weight of writing.

For the racing reader, a game can slow them down just enough to make them attend to the pattern and retrieve it, instead of skating on recognition.

But there is an important warning here, and it will save you from disappointment.

Games do not create orthographic mapping by themselves.

Mapping happens when the child retrieves the spelling and produces it,

which is why BUILD, clear, and WRITE from recall were non-negotiable all through Chapters 2 through 10.

So use the games as practice, not as proof.

They are an assistant coach, not the head coach.

The rule for using games without losing the method

Here is the single rule that keeps games from turning into random screen time.

Match the game to the target you are currently teaching.

If this week your target is Double and Drop with ing, you choose games that reinforce short vowels, final consonants, and sound segmentation, because those are the pieces the child must reliably execute to apply the rule.

If your target is the three sounds of ed, you choose games that sharpen attention to the last sound in the base word. That is the decision point.

If your target is tion and sion, you choose games that build awareness of syllables and ending chunks, and you keep your own table practice anchored to base words and families the way you learned in 7.3.

If your target is a root family like aud, you use games as light repetition, but you still do the real mapping work at the table through word sums and retrieval writing.

The mistake families make is letting games choose the curriculum.

A child plays something fun for twenty minutes, and the parent hopes that counts as spelling.

Sometimes it helps a little, but it is not the engine.

You are the engine, fifteen minutes a day. The games are the flywheel that keeps momentum when the day is messy.

What “ongoing practice” actually means in a Sound First home

Ongoing practice is not adding more and more time.

Ongoing practice is keeping the code active in small ways so you do not lose ground between sessions, and so your child experiences spelling as

something they can do, not something they perform once a week.

Here are three simple ways to build ongoing practice without adding a new subject to your day.

1. The five-minute add-on

On days you do your full fifteen-minute routine, you can add five minutes of a GSU game after the final transfer sentence, as a reward that is still on target.

Parent: “Nice work. You did the hard part with your brain and pencil. Now you can do five minutes of the word game.”

This is not bribery. It is a smart pairing.

You are connecting “I worked carefully” with “I get to practice in a lighter way.”

And because the game is matched to your target, the child is getting more reps on the exact decision you want to become automatic.

2. The off-day bridge

Some days you will not do the full routine. Someone is sick. Dinner is late. Your brain is fried.

This is where families usually fall into the all-or-nothing trap. If we cannot do the whole thing, we do nothing. Then the habit starts to crack.

Instead, do the bridge.

Three minutes of tapping and five minutes of a matched game counts as keeping the thread.

Parent: “Today is a short day. We’re going to do two quick taps and one game.”

You can even keep it almost comically small.

Tap: “ship,” “jump.”

Then game.

Then done.

You are telling your child’s brain, “We are still a family who practices the code.”

3. The independent practice slot

If your child is old enough to handle a device responsibly for a short window, you can make the games part of independent work.

Not an hour. Ten minutes.

Not every day if that causes battles. Three days a week is fine.

And you do not send them off with “Go play a spelling game.”

You send them off with a target.

Parent: “Today you’re practicing the short vowel sounds. Ten minutes. When the timer rings, you’re done.”

Or:

Parent: “Today you’re practicing ending sounds for past tense. Ten minutes.”

You are still the coach. The game is just delivering reps.

How to keep games from becoming guessing

Remember how this whole book began: the lie of the list trained children to guess. Sound First retrained them to check.

Some games, if used carelessly, can reawaken guessing because they reward speed. Click fast, move on, hope for the best.

So you set two house rules for spelling games.

Rule one: We play slow enough to be accurate.

If your child starts slapping answers quickly, you calmly intervene the same way you would at the table.

Parent: “Pause. We don’t do spelling fast. We do spelling correctly. Slow down and listen.”

Rule two: If you miss three in a row, you stop and ask for help.

This prevents the child from practicing errors. A child who misses repeatedly is either tired, or the level is wrong, or the target is not what you think it is.

You do not want ten minutes of wrong reps. Wrong reps build confidence in the wrong pathway.

So you give a simple escape hatch.

Parent: “If you miss three in a row, call me. We’ll fix the level or we’ll stop.”

That one rule keeps the games aligned with Sound First values: upstream correction, not downstream shame.

A parent-friendly way to choose what to practice next

One reason parents love programs is that the program tells them what to do.

Sound First gives you something better: the ability to choose based on what your child actually needs.

But that also means you sometimes stare at the options and feel unsure.

So here is a simple weekly rhythm that keeps ongoing practice easy.

Monday: New target at the table, no game or a very short one
Tuesday: Same target at the table, five-minute game add-on
Wednesday: Table session or off-day bridge plus game
Thursday: Table session, retrieval sprint, short game
Friday: Proof day, mix and retrieve, then let the child choose their favorite matched game

The point is not the days of the week. The point is the balance.

Teach and retrieve with you.
Repeat and reinforce with light practice.
Keep it small enough that it keeps happening.

How games support specific Sound First skills

To keep this practical, here is how to think about matching the type of game to the skill layer you are building.

Sound segmentation and order (Chapter 3 and Chapter 9 struggling

speller support)
Choose games that require identifying beginning, middle, and ending sounds, blending sounds, or manipulating one sound at a time.

This supports the child who freezes, the child who drops sounds, and the child who can tap forward but loses the sequence under pressure.

Phonograms and sound-spellings (Chapter 5)
Choose games that practice common sound-spelling choices, especially vowels. Many spelling problems that look like memory problems are actually vowel-choice problems.

The goal is not to memorize hundreds of words. The goal is to make the main keys feel familiar enough that the child stops grabbing the wrong one under stress.

Rules and signals (Chapter 6)
Choose games that reinforce short versus long vowel patterns, doubled consonants after short vowels, and silent e patterns. Games can provide quick exposure and repetition so your child sees these signals as normal, not as special cases.

Suffixing and endings (Chapter 7)
Choose games that require noticing endings, sorting words by pattern, or matching base words to changed forms. For -ed, anything that trains attention to the last sound is helpful. For tion and sion, anything that builds awareness of syllables and common ending chunks supports the table work you are doing.

Morphology and word families (Chapter 8)
This is where games are more of a supplement than a main tool, because morphology sticks best when you talk about meaning and build word sums. But games can still provide practice in recognizing prefixes and suffixes, and in handling longer words without panic.

The point is not to master morphology through a game. The point is to keep your child comfortable with parts.

What to do when your child asks for more

Sometimes, especially with the racing reader who likes feeling competent, you will get the question:

“Can I do more of the games?”

Yes, within boundaries.

You are allowed to say yes to extra practice that is not causing fights. But keep two limits.

Limit one: Protect writing.

If games become the whole plan, your child may improve at clicking and still not improve at spelling on paper. So you keep the core.

First the fifteen-minute routine when it happens.
Then games.

Limit two: Keep the level honest.

Kids love the level where they can win. That is fine sometimes. Confidence matters.

But make sure some of their time is at a level that matches your current target, where they have to pay attention, not just coast.

A simple script for this:

Parent: “You can do ten more minutes. Five minutes on the level you like, and five minutes on your practice level.”

Calm. Clear. No debate.

The long-term goal: a child who keeps practicing without you

In Chapter 10.2, you saw the troubleshooting principle: return upstream. Tap again. Build again. Shrink the target. Add retrieval. Protect a win.

The deeper goal of the entire chapter is that your child starts doing that for themselves.

Games can help, not because they teach every rule, but because they give your child a place to experience independent success with the code.

A child who can complete a short practice session alone starts to believe, “I can do this without being rescued.”

That belief is one of the biggest gifts you can give a child who has lived through spelling shame.

So if you want a simple way to close this chapter in your own mind, it’s this:

Your fifteen-minute day is the lesson.
The free GSU games are the reps.
Your child’s confidence comes from doing the reps successfully, in the right target, often enough that the brain stops treating spelling like a gamble.

You do not need a kit.
You do not need a new program every semester.
You do not need to be a linguist.

You need a small routine, a calm correction script, and enough repetition to make the system feel true.

And now you have a way to get that repetition without adding more pressure to your table.

Fifteen minutes with you.
A few minutes of matched practice.
Over time, a child who stops guessing.

That is ongoing practice that actually lasts.