



Ask Rebecca

Dear Katie,

Rebecca,

Why don't the words tested in each unit reflect a skill?

Katie Sardonsky
Literacy Coach

Good question. You are probably accustomed to spelling programs that begin with a word list, each word an illustration of the unit's skill. For example, a word list in a customary program might focus on silent letters, let's say silent *k* and/or *w*. Then the word list might include words such as *knife, knee, knuckle, knew; write, wrinkle, wrist, wreath*. The skill and the words are partners for that unit. Once the unit is covered, then a new skill and another set of words comes to the fore. And so on through the school year.

The Sourcebook methodology is different. Each unit has skills, it has words, and it has tests, but a student's Spelling Words do not necessarily reflect a unit's skills. Why? I'll explain.

First, let me ask you this. With the customary approach, did the students learn the unit's skill? Who knows? The skill was not tested. Did the students learn the words? Students may have spelled the words right on the test, but did they learn the words long term so that they spell them correctly in their writing? And what happens to the words students *missed* on the test? Is there a teaching plan for these words?

I am convinced that students do not learn a skill nor do they learn to spell words when they are presented in the customary fashion described above. I've tried it—so have you. The result is often little more than students memorizing words just for a test, often promptly forgetting both the skill and the words after the grade is recorded. Then the program moves on. Students had one chance to learn a unit's skill and words—and if they didn't—well, the program moves on anyway.

There is an alternative to this one-chance system. It is the system you'll discover I use in the Sourcebooks.

Let's start with skills. Skills are not taught just once. Check the Scope and Sequence in the back of your Sourcebook to verify this. Research, as well as our experience, tells us that authentic learning takes place in small increments over time. This is why I choose to systematically revisit skills.

Each unit provides a choice of skills. Teachers have the flexibility to differentiate and select the skills they feel are most important for their students. Yet, to ensure that teachers do not bypass a skill that is

continued . . .



Ask Rebecca (continued)

essential in a unit, the Test Ready section (not optional) is their safety net. In each unit, a critical skill is the focus of this section. Then this skill is tested in the end-of-unit Skill Test. It is formative—the results inform instruction. The results tell a teacher whether students would benefit from more or less of this skill in subsequent units as teachers make their lesson choices from the menu each unit offers.

Let's say a teacher chooses to teach silent *k* and silent *w*. A lesson may begin with a brief discussion of what students already know about silent letters with the talk turning to silent *k* and *w*. Students develop a collection of silent *k* and *w* words themselves, often cooperatively. They may make a class book of the words or an ongoing chart as the words are observed and collected over time. This activity helps students become discriminating observers of words. It requires observation, action, and thinking. And it widens students' exposure to words.

In one classroom I heard children discussing the words *who* and *answer*—should they be in the silent *w* list because the *w* seems silent, yet these words are different from the other silent *w* words? Academic dialogue enhances thinking and learning. The Sourcebook sets up situations to accomplish this. Throughout the program, students engage in academic dialogue and skills that other subjects presumably teach, too—detecting patterns, gathering evidence, evaluating, reconsidering, rebutting. To me, this is education.

Now, let's turn to Spelling Words. In my methodology, students' Spelling Words, the *exact* words, are not known to them prior to the test. I do not want teachers to waste time giving a test for which students memorized the content the night before, just for the test. The formative Word Test in the Sourcebook assesses words from the current unit, yet all words that occurred in previous units of the program are in the mix, too. The words students miss are their Spelling Words, targeted for examination and study. Then, to ensure mastery of these words, they become a part of the automatic recycling system of all words in the program. Like skills, words are revisited routinely.

The skills taught in the units cumulatively provide students the wherewithal for rethinking the words they missed on a Word Test. Students might note: Oh, I forgot the silent *w* in *wrong*—it's important to remember that. It's on our chart, Words Spelled with Silent *W*!

Now, I'm hoping I answered your question. Simply stated, the Spelling Words do not necessarily reflect a specific unit's skills, but cumulatively the skills taught over time provide students with insights to observe their Spelling Words thoughtfully. Yet, remember, it's the Skill Test that targets an essential skill for evaluation in each unit.

Do you have a question? Call me at home or toll free at the office, send me an email, or set up a complimentary conference call for a group of colleagues who have questions. • email: rsitton@sittonspelling.com
• home phone: 480-473-7277 • office phone: toll free at 888-WE-SPELL (937-7355) or 480-596-5100