



It's a Spelling Surprise! for upper grades

Memorization is the lowest form of learning and often temporary. To provide students with validated memorization alternatives for learning to spell long term, Sourcebook activity ideas offer suggestions to guide students toward understanding the English spelling system. At every grade level, students discover spelling patterns that occur most often in English as well as those that are rare or unexpected. Words with unexpected spellings are often called words with irregular spellings, or Surprise Words.

A Surprise Word cannot be spelled solely with an auditory, phonics-based strategy. Phonics is among the spelling strategies students learn in the Sourcebook. With this foundation, they have an advantage in spelling hundreds of regularly spelled words. For irregular spellings, students learn to identify the part of a word that follows phonics rules and the part of a word that does not. For the part of a word that does not, students become skilled at using their eyes to note inconsistencies and to employ other strategic insights for correct spelling.

Here is a word-work activity and correlated student worksheet to reinforce long *a* expected spellings and its deviants, long *a* Surprise Words. Its goal is to provide an opportunity for students to work cooperatively to expand their bank of long *a* words, develop analytic insights for observing long *a* spelling patterns, and learn to express their understanding of spelling long *a* words in their writing.

To begin, organize students into cooperative groups to brainstorm words containing the long *a* sound. Set a time frame, perhaps three -five minutes depending upon the ability of your students to focus cooperatively. If necessary, preface the activity with a quick review of the long *a* sound, the vowel heard in *rain*, *day*, and *same*.

Each group's assignment is to identify long *a* words and to select a *recorder* to list their discoveries. Then the group's words are read to the class by a *reporter* chosen by the group. The class oversees—or *overhears*—the validity of each long *a* word.

Next, the class creates a list of long *a* words. The recorder from each group selects words to record on the class list. Using this list, students sort the words by their spelling pattern.

Guide students to discover that at this level four long *a* spelling patterns are most common: *a* at the beginning of a syllable (as in *lady*), *ai* (as in *rain*), *ay* (as in *day*), and *a*-consonant-silent *e* (as in *same*). These patterns are expected spellings. Other spellings for long *a* are unexpected, less common Surprise Words (i.e., *sleigh*, *they*, *great*).

Print the student worksheet for follow-up practice. The worksheet engages students in high-frequency words with expected long *a* spelling patterns that *do not* spell long *a* (*against* and *have*), as well as long *a* words that contain an unexpected spelling (*obey* and *great*). All are Surprise Words that require a written explanation on the worksheet.

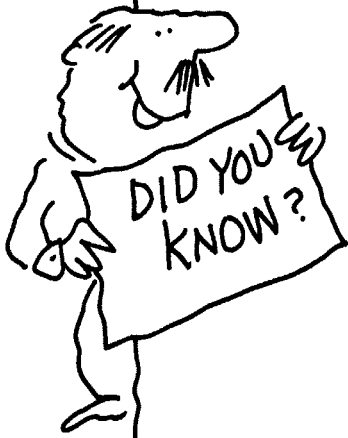
Students may complete the worksheet activity as a whole class, in cooperative groups, or independently at school or at home. A sample worksheet is attached to this article.

Then discuss answers to the “why” questions. Guide students to these conclusions.

- 👁 *Against* is a Surprise Word because the *ai* spelling pattern usually spells the long *a* sound, but *against* does not have a long *a* sound.
- 👁 *Have* is a Surprise Word because the *a-consonant-silent e* spelling pattern usually spells the long *a* sound, but *have* does not have a long *a* sound.
- 👁 *Obey* is a Surprise Word because *obey* has a long *a* sound, but *ey* is not an expected spelling pattern for the long *a* sound.
- 👁 *Great* is a Surprise Word because *great* has a long *a* sound, but *ea* is not an expected spelling pattern for the long *a* sound.

For Follow Up

- 👁 Encourage students to be on the lookout for more long *a* words to add to their class list. Long *a* words may be encountered over time across the curriculum.
- 👁 Ask students to write sentences using the long *a* Surprise Words recorded on their ongoing class list. (See above.)
- 👁 Write a sentence on the board with spelling errors for some long *a* words (i.e., They're greate players beause thay're braking records agin!). Then, as a class, have students identify the errors. Next ask students to rewrite the sentence correctly.



The most frequent spelling pattern for long *a* among all English vocabulary is *a* at the end of a syllable, as in *table*, occurring about 45% of the time. This pattern is first introduced in Level 3 when children’s high-frequency writing words begin to expand to words with more than one syllable. For one syllable words, the most frequent pattern is *a-consonant-silent e*, as in *take*, occurring about 35% of the time. Two other frequent long *a* spelling patterns are sufficiently frequent to merit instruction, *ai* as in *train* and *ay* as in *tray*. Yet, a word in the top twenty high-use English words, *they*, exhibits none of these patterns! Its spelling is irregular, a spelling students learn to call a Surprise Word. This mnemonic rhyme helps many students master this spelling demon—

There is no *a* in *they*! There is no *a* in *they*!
Just write *the*, then add *y*. You can do it, don’t be shy!
Just write *the*, then add *y*. You can do it, so can I!
[FYI, this is a modification of the rhyme in the Sourcebook.]



Name _____

Say **against**. Look at the letters in **against**.

To learn to spell **against**—open your eyes!

Against is a Spelling Surprise!

Why?

Say **have**. Look at the letters in **have**.

To learn to spell **have**—open your eyes!

Have is a Spelling Surprise!

Why?

Say **obey**. Look at the letters in **obey**.

To learn to spell **obey**—open your eyes!

Obey is a Spelling Surprise!

Why?



Say {great}. Look at the letters in {great}.

To learn to spell {great}—open your eyes!

{Great} is a Spelling Surprise!

Why?



Find more Surprise Words! Then explain in writing why they are a surprise.