

Why is it spelled like that?

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written (30 August 2012) for *The Sun* newspaper, following the publication of *Spell It Out*

If you're reading this, you've managed to decode English spelling, despite all its irregularities. But where did the oddities come from? There's a story behind every word. Here's ten of the best, taken from *Spell It Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling*.

Why is it *hiccough* and not *hiccup*?

It was actually written in such forms as *hikup* and *hickup* when it arrived in English in the 16th century. But a popular feeling arose that there was a connection with a cough. So, people reasoned, if *cough* was spelled with *ough*, *hiccough* should be the same. But the earlier pronunciation stayed.

Why is it *seize* and not *sieze*?

If you were ever taught that you should use 'i before e except after c', you soon learned that this 'rule' didn't work. There are hundreds of exceptions, and *seize* is one, along with *vein*, *veil*, *rein*, *leisure*, and so on. These all show the spellings the words originally had in French.

Why is it *love* and not *luv*?

The word was actually spelled with a *u* in Anglo-Saxon times. But when the French scribes wrote it down, they found it difficult to read, because the letters *u* and *v* looked the same. So they changed the 'u' vowel to an 'o'.

Why is it *lamb* and not *lam*?

In Old English, the final *b* was pronounced in such words as *lamb*, *dumb*, and *climb*. Because *m* and *b* are both made with the two lips, after a while people didn't bother pronouncing the *b*. But people had got used to the earlier spelling, so it stayed.

Why is it *ghost* and not *gost*?

The word was spelled *gost* originally. But when William Caxton began to print books in England in the 15th century, his Flemish typesetters didn't know English very well, so they spelled several words in a Flemish way, and *ghost* was one of those which caught on.

Why is it *debt* and not *det*?

When the word arrived in English in the 13th century, it was spelled *det*, *dett*, *dette*, and suchlike. But spelling reformers decided that a single spelling was desirable, and to help fix one in people's minds, they looked to Latin, where the word was *debitum*, and added a silent 'b'. They thought it would help!

Why is it *scorn* and *skin* and not *skorn* and *scin*?

It depends on the language the words came from. Words that came into English from French, Latin, and Greek usually end up with *sc*, as in *scorn* and *scarce*. Words from Old Norse or Dutch keep the spelling used in those languages, as in *skin* and *skipper*.

Why is it *dance* and not *dans*?

Because the French scribes liked to spell words ending in an 's' sound with *ce*. In Old English, *mice* was spelled *mys*, but it changed to its modern form in the Middle Ages. We see that French preference in many words, such as *since*, *fence*, and *face*.

Why is it *strudel* and not *stroodle*?

When German *Nudel* arrived in English in the late 18th century it was immediately spelled *noodle*; but a century later *Strudel* kept its original spelling. This is because people had begun to value exotic spellings – something we still do today. We write *ciao* and not *chow*.

Still being sorted

There are many words in English with alternative spellings, such as *judgment* and *judgement* or *realise* and *realize*. Food words often vary. Look at the menu in different Indian restaurants, and you will see *popadoms*, *poppadums*, *popadums*, *papadoms*, *poppodoms*, *poppadams*, and more. And we eat *yoghurt*, *yogurt*, *yogourt*, or *yoghourt* as well as *hummus*, *houmous*, *hummos*, *hummous*, or *humus*.