

SoundSpel
Written as it sounds
Pronounced as it's written

SoundSpel is a reformed spelling system that makes English spelling simple and regular while preserving continuity from traditional spelling. Its great advantage over other reformed spelling systems is that it is easier to learn, and particularly easy to read, for those raised with traditional spelling. Specifically, Soundspel:

- Does not introduce any new symbols, thus making it compatible with the current (QWERTY) keyboard.
- Relies upon familiar digraphs.
- Does not assign unusual notations to sounds (ex. using q for the ng sound), except for 'aa, uu, and zh.'
- Does not introduce diacritical marks (such as accents), which are generally not favored in English-speaking countries.
- Does not dramatically change the appearance of existing words.
- Keeps the spelling of the 20 most common words, uses s for plurals and possessives, and the current 'th' digraph.

A concise summary of SoundSpel rules is:

1. Short vowels are a single letter, as in: sat, set, did, dot, cut
2. Long vowels are followed immediately by an e, as in: sundae, see, die, toe, cue
3. No silent letters
4. Most double letters are removed
5. Consonants such as f, c, s, j, g have a consistent, single sound and spelling

This results in a system that is intuitive and consistent:

hat, have, laugh, plaid → hat, hav, laf, plad	roll, hole, soul, goal, bowl → roel, hoel, soel, goel, boel
red, head, said, friend → red, hed, sed, frend	tough, love, judge, tongue → tuf, luv, juj, tung
herd, earth, birth, journey → hurd, urth, burth, jurny	knight, receipt, asthma → niet, reseet, azma
hide, fight, find, sign, knight → hied, fiet, fiend, sien, niet	phone, city, judge, gorgeous → foen, sity, juj, gorjus

Phonetics

Phonemes are represented as follows, with the nearest possible International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) equivalent. Wherever possible, examples are given that come out the same in TO (Traditional Orthography) and in SoundSpel. Exceptions are duly noted.

Notation	IPA	Example	Notation	IPA	Example
a	/æ/	sat	ae	/eɪ/	sundae
e	/ɛ/	set	ee	/i:/	see
i	/ɪ/	did	ie	/aɪ/	die
o	/ɒ/	dot	oe	/oʊ/	toe
u	/ʌ/	cut	ue	/ju:/	cue

Notation	IPA	Example	Notation	IPA	Example
ar	/ɑ:r/	bar	arr	/æɪr/	marry
er	/ɛr/	murder	err	/ɛr/	cherry
or	/ɔ:r/	for	orr	/ɔr/	sorry
ur	/ɜ:r/	murder	uur		yuur [TO your]

Notation	IPA	Example
aer	/ɛər/	aer [TO 'air']
aa	/ɑ:/	aam [TO 'alm']
eer	/i:r/	beer
oo	/u:/	moon
uu	/ʊ/	guud [TO 'good']
oi	/ɔɪ/	coin
oy	/ɔɪ/	boy
ou	/aʊ/	out
ow	/aʊ/	cow
au	/ɔ:/	fraud
aw	/ɔ:/	saw
uur	/ʊər/	tuur [TO 'tour']
uer	/jʊər/	cuer [TO 'cure']

Notation	IPA	Example
b	/b/	bat
c/k	/k/	cat, kit, cael [TO 'kale'], majik [TO 'magic']
ch	/tʃ/	chat
d	/d/	did
f	/f/	fat

g	/g/	gag
h	/h/	hat
j	/dʒ/	jet
l	/l/	let
m	/m/	met
n	/n/	net
ng	/ŋ/	singing
ngg	/ŋg/	fingger [TO 'finger']
nk	/ŋk/	ink
p	/p/	pep
q	/kw/	qaek [TO 'quake']
r	/ɹ/	red
s	/s/	set
sh	/ʃ/	shed
t	/t/	tot
th	/θ/	thin
th	/ð/	this
v	/v/	van
w	/w/	war
wh	/w/	whi [TO 'why']
x	/ks/	box
y	/j/	yes
z	/z/	zoo
zh	/ʒ/	azher [TO 'azure']

Exceptions and other differences

U

U, meaning "you", is capitalized in line with the current usage for the first-person pronoun, I.

Th

The definite article 'the' is abbreviated to *th* in SoundSpel following the practice of Rondthaler in his 1986 dictionary. Given the high frequency of this word, shortening its spelling makes its length the same as that of common words such as 'is, as, if, so, no, go, do, to, of, an, me, we, he, be, mi, bi' and is a *godsend* for typists, as this editor will readily affirm. This proposal may be controversial, but it sidesteps the issue of the two different pronunciations of 'the,' the one before words beginning with a vowel and the other before words beginning with a consonant (as in TO "*thee apple*" versus "*thuh book*"). This abbreviation does not apply in compound words such as "nevertheles" [TO 'nevertheless'], where the intervening vowel may not be dropped.

Common words

No change in the words *as, has, is, his, her, hers, I, me, we, he, she, be, do, to, so, no, go, ago, per, hi, of, off* and *all*, and words derived from these (such as *being, together, thruout*). Words ending in *-ful* also remain unchanged. No change in the 'wh' spellings in "whot [what], when, whaer [where], whether, whi [why], etc. In addition, there are a number of words that, while not identical to TO, are allowed to be shorter than the usual rules of SoundSpel would permit. Major exceptions are common words that have been completely respelled because their traditional spelling differs from their ideal phonetic representation by two or more letters, e.g. "duz [does], dun [done] wuz [was], hoo [who], hoom [whom] hoos [whose], whaer [where], thaer [their, there], thae [they], wun [one], wunss [once], aet [eight], noe [know], sum [some], cum [come], cuud [could], wuud [would], shuud [should], miet [might], aut [ought], riet [right], thru [through], bin [been], etc.

Word-final S

No change in the plural suffix *-s* (as in *jobs*), the possessive suffix *'s* (as in *man's*), and in the third person present singular verb suffix *-s* (as in *he runs*), even when the *s* is sometimes pronounced /z/. This feature is called the *grammatical s*, as opposed to the *lexical s*, which always has the /s/ sound.

Word-final SS

Some words in SoundSpel are spelled with a doubled *ss* at the end, but only in the singular and in uninflected forms. This device is necessary to prevent certain words from being misread as plurals of another word, as in "curss" [TO 'curse'] as opposed to "curs"; "horss"; ['horse'] as opposed to "hors" ['whores']; "plaess" ['place'] as opposed to "plaes" ([plays'], and so on.

"th" digraph and x

No change in the *th* digraph even when it is pronounced as voiced /ð/ as opposed to unvoiced /θ/. Similarly, the letter *x* is retained for both voiced /gz/ and unvoiced /ks/. Unvoiced occurrences of this sound outnumber voiced ones 5 to 1, and words normally calling for a voiced *x* are understood even if pronounced unvoicedⁱ.

Schwa

No changes in the spelling of short (schwa) vowels in the unstressed syllables of words like organ, novel, pens~~il~~ [pencil], and lemon, unless the spelling would indicate an over-pronunciation of the word (as in TO 'mountain' respelled as "mounten").

Unstressed schwi or "half-ee"

Depending on its position in the word or root, the unstressed "half ee" (as in between, detect, reform, champion, editorial, hapyer [happier], and fifty) continues to be spelled as e, i, or y.

Double "rr"

As in traditional orthography, indicates that the preceding vowel is short (as in carry, merry, and sorry).

Double "ll"

Dewey, Ripman, and the other respected advocates of spelling reform always spelled the word 'all' and words containing the "all" letter sequence, such as TO 'call, fall, wall, tall, hall, mall,' etc. in strictly phonetic fashion as "aul, caul, faul, waul, taul, haul, maul," and so on, and Rondthaler's 1986 dictionary duly followed that practice. In the 2022 edition of SoundSpel, however, the one innovation here is that the word **all** in *itself* is retained as a WordSign (in accordance with frequency analysis), but this isolated exception is *not* to be extended by analogy to unrelated words – the word 'awl' is still respelled to SS "aul," for example. This means that the *only* words in SoundSpel that are spelled with the "all" trigraph in place of the phonetic /aul/ letter sequence are compound words that contain the word 'all' with its *original* meaning, namely TO 'overall' and 'overalls,' which are represented in SS with a hyphen as "oever-all" and "oever-allss" respectively." All other words containing this constellation of phonemes, such as TO 'alter, altar, altogether, falter, false, waltz, hall, mall,' etc. are to be respelled in SS as "aulter, aultar, aultgether, faulter, faulss, waults, haul, maul, and so forth.

Double "ff"

SoundSpel and its precursor systems retain the traditional spelling of 'of' instead of respelling it as *ov or *uv, as some proposed reforms have done. Likewise, the spelling of 'off' is retained as *is*, as opposed to shortening it to *of. The high frequency of these words plays a role here, as well as the need to maintain backwards compatibility with TO. (As a practical matter, the importance of maintaining a strong *visual distinction* between the **on** and the **off** settings on mechanical and electronic devices is yet another reason for spelling the latter term with three letters instead of two!)

That being said, however, the *only* words in SoundSpel that retain the 'off' spelling are compound words containing the word 'off' with its *original* meaning. A list of such items includes words and expressions such as TO 'spinoff, runoff, showoff, offsites, offhand, castoff,' and so on, which are represented in SoundSpel with a hyphen and appropriate changes as "spin-off, run-off, sho-off, off-sieds, off-hand, cast-off," etc.

All other words containing the three-letter pattern 'off' or the phonetic equivalent of it, such as TO 'offer, doff, often, soft, soften, loft, etc., are to be respelled in SS with *only* a *single* 'f,' as in "ofer, dof, ofen, soft, sofen, loft, etc.

Word-final O and I

Since short vowels by definition cannot end words or open syllables, this leaves open the possibility of not having to explicitly mark long vowels with a *silent e* if they occur at the *end* of a word. It turns out that for certain classes of words long o or long i at the end of a word may be unambiguously indicated with a single letter, as in *banjo*, *go*, *so*, *alibi*, *hi*, *fli* [fly], *mi* (but *banjoes*, *alibieing* [alibiing], *flies*, etc., since the vowel is no longer at the end of the word).

“oo” versus “uu”

‘uu’ and ‘oo’ represent the two respective vowel sounds in TO ‘footstool,’ which is spelled in SoundSpel as “fuoostool” accordingly. Even though the doubled ‘uu’ is a digraph it actually represents a “short vowel,” which means that it never ends a word or an open syllable. Therefore, SS effectively recognizes six short vowels for English, a, e, i, o, u, uu, as in “*pat*, *pet*, *pit*, *pot*, *put* [putt] and *puut* [put].” Some other examples of SS ‘uu’ are “*cuushon* [cushion], *puuding* [pudding], *shuur* [sure], and *yuur* [your].’ The ‘oo’ is only used in SS for the ‘long vowel’ pronunciation of that digraph, meaning that it can always end words or open syllables, as in “*boo hoo*, *soop* [soup], *soot* [suit], *rooin* [ruin], etc.

“aa” versus “o”

Though many people do not distinguish between the pronunciation of the first vowel in SS “*faather*” [‘father’] and “*bother*,” use of the “doubled aa” is critical in that ‘aa’ is technically a “long vowel” while ‘o’ is definitely a “short vowel.” As a long vowel it replaces ‘ah’ and ‘a’ as a terminal vowel and appears in such words as “*aa* [ah], *baa*, [baa, bah], *haa* [ha], *faa laa laa* [fa la la], and so on. It also takes the primary stress in words of more than one syllable, as in SS “*baraazh*” [barrage], “*garaazh*” [garage], and “*miraazh*” [mirage]. Finally, it avoids spellings that would be misleading and strange looking, as in “*paam* vs. **pom* [palm], *caam* vs. **com* [calm], *saam* vs. **som* [psalm], etc.

Ambiguous syllable breaks

A hyphen following a vowel unambiguously separates a long vowel from another vowel following it, as in *re-enter* and *co-operate*. SoundSpel also uses a hyphen to separate the letters t and h when these are not to be interpreted as the *th* digraph, as in “*boet-hous*” [boathouse], even though TO does not regularly do this. On rare occasions, an apostrophe may also be used as a syllable separator (see “Apostrophe” note below).

False diphthongs

If two vowels — such as *ea* — do not match a digraph on the SoundSpel chart, then the syllable ends with the first vowel: *reakt* (*ea* is not a digraph), *jeenius*, *memorial*, *creativ*. In cases of more than two vowels the syllable ends with the first digraph: *flood* (*oo*, being the first digraph, ends the syllable — it is not *flo-oid*), *hieest*, *freeing*, *inueendo*, *power*, *continueing*, *paeabl*, *evaluateet*

Apostrophe used as a syllable break and/or to avoid an intrusive ‘y’

In cases where a hyphen would not be appropriate or convenient, an apostrophe may be used as a syllable break, as in “*saeli’ent*” [TO ‘salient’], “*leeni’ent*” [‘lenient’], “*arju’us*” [arduous], *desiju’us* [deciduous]. Note that while the hyphen has the same function as a word boundary and allows the dropping of a terminal *e*, as in “*no-whaer*, *bi-wae*...” etc., the apostrophe separator does not allow this, e.g., “*die’erresis* [dieresis], *poe’et* [optional respelling for ‘poet’]. This is a new feature introduced by R. J. McGehee.

Exceptional contraction of unstressed “oo” to “u”

In Rondthaler’s red dictionary there were words such as “*uezhooal, uezhooaly, akchooal, akchooality, arjoous* [arduous], *desijooous* [deciduous]” where the spelling was awkward and an incorrect stress pattern was indicated. The awkwardness of the high frequency words was regularly noticed by typists. The problem is an unstressed “half-oo” that is difficult to represent in SoundSpel. After 1995 a decision was made to allow the unstressed “ooal” vowel-chain to be shortened to “ual,” which had the effect of shortening the above spellings to “uezhual, uezhualy, akchualy, akchuality...” etc. For words such as *arjoous* [arduous] and *desijooous* [deciduous], however, contraction would lead to a conflict with the uu digraph, as in *arjuus and *desijuus. McGehee recommended using an apostrophe separator in those cases, e.g. *arju’us, desiju’us.”

Occasional use of the ‘aur’ sequence in place of the ‘or’ digraph in stressed syllables

To avoid having the astrological sign ‘Taurus’ conflated with the word ‘torus’ (in other words, a donut!), to avoid having ‘aural’ and ‘oral’ confused with each other, and to prevent TO ‘aura’ being spelled *ora in SS, among other things, the ‘aur’ sequence is occasionally allowed, but in unstressed form it is replaced by other digraphs, viz. SS *dienosor* [dinosaur], *resteraant* [restaurant].

History

SoundSpel has a long history of development that was closely associated with spelling reform movements in the twentieth century. Walter Ripman and William Archer wrote an early dictionary of the system, "New Spelling" (Nue Speling), which was republished in 1941 by the Simplified Spelling Society. In 1969 Godfrey Dewey improved upon Ripman's and Archer's work, producing "WES" (World English Spelling). Dewey and Edward Rondthaler, a prominent typesetter and CEO of the International Typeface Corporation, began corresponding by 1971. In 1986 the book "Dictionary of Simplified American Spelling," written by Rondthaler and Edward Lias, was published by the American Language Academy. This called for improvements to spelling, with clearer rules and better grapheme/ phoneme correspondence. It was slightly less strict than classic New Spelling, allowing "then" rather than "dhen", for example. The system was further reformed from 1987 on and became SoundSpel.
