

# Spring Fling 2020 – Dr. Peter Bowers Ph.D., Structured Word Inquiry.

Nicola Lott

April 25 was a big day in CATT-OG's 23-year history as it was our first entirely online professional development event. Due to COVID, members were able to connect with each other and our presenter from the comfort of their own home. They were then able to view the presentation at their leisure for 5 days after the event.

Dr. Bowers explained that he is a person with dyslexia and a classroom teacher who explored Structured Literacy Inquiry through his Ph.D. as a way for classroom teachers and interventionists to provide a meaning-based word inquiry instruction that is based in research.

Dr. Bowers went on to explain that the English Language becomes logical when you look at words from an orthographic perspective. For example, the number *two* has a *w* in it as a marker to indicate that it is connected to the words *twin*, *twenty* and *twice*, all of which are connected through their meaning.

sci + ence → science

un sub | un con pre ne | **sci** "knowing" | ent i-ous ist ly ness | ence i-fic-al-ly | ous ly ness

© Real Spelling & Pascal Mirz

L. stru(ere), struct(us) "build"    L. sc(ire), sc(itus) "know"    L. fac(ere), "do, make"

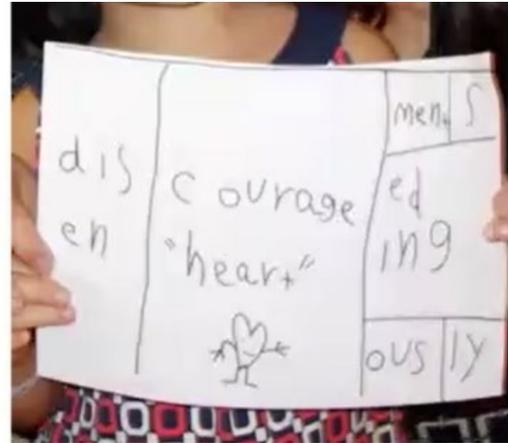
The joy that results from literacy **instruction** which **builds** understanding of word **structure** as a context for **scientific** investigation of the interrelation of **spelling** and **meaning**.

Peter Bowers, Phd  
WordWorks Literacy Center

In the above photo, Peter used the root *sci* as an example. If you teach a child that the root *sci* means *knowing* you can play with it by adding different affixes to discover many words that use this root. Adding the prefix *pre-* to it makes *prescience*. The pronunciation may change, but the meaning of the word is unlocked, and the spelling becomes logical. A dyslexic child used to working with words that are way below their age level will now have the tools they need to be able to define a complex word.

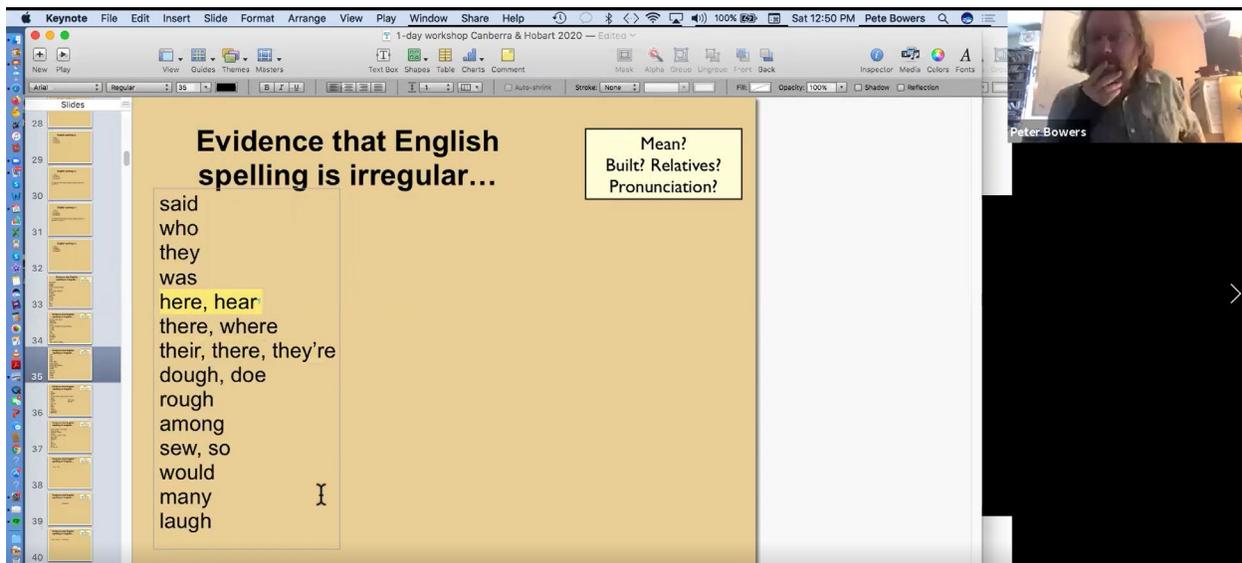
Here is a grade 1 example:

Cour is the French word for heart, in English we see a translation for the same concept in words like *braveheart*. You can look up the meaning of words you come across through [Etymonline](http://Etymonline).



*Gina Cook: "We always tell kids that stories are made of words. We forget to tell them that words are also made up of stories."*

When we ask people to make a list of 'crazy' English spellings their lists invariably include many homophones.



People assume that the English language should be spelled phonetically. For example, if words sound the same they should be spelled the same. However, we have very few homophonic homographs in English. (*Words that sound the same and are spelled the same.*) This is because our written language is structured to indicate the differences in meaning. For example: *Hear* has the word *ear* in it. However, *here* is connected to *there* and *where*. The spelling of the word is giving us the clue to its meaning.

In Richard Venetsky's book *The American Way of Spelling*. He discusses The Homophone Principle. Which states that where ever two words sound the same, they are spelled differently to indicate the differences in their orthography. In fact in English words are spelled differently where ever possible, to avoid confusion.

Lists of homophones are actually examples of English making sense *instead* of demonstrating its craziness. It is just a misunderstanding of our writing system.

Peter talked about the layers in our language of phonological awareness, phonics, morphology and orthography. While PA, phonics and morphology are important components of literacy instruction we

need to add in the final layer of orthography right from the beginning as it is at this level that spelling begins to make sense.

**Evidence that English spelling is irregular...**

Mean?  
Built? Relatives?  
Pronunciation?

**Place**

hear here  
ear there  
where

their  
they  
them

\*thay  
<ay>

<ey>

obey obedient

prey pray  
predator

*Sea* and *see* are spelled differently because they don't mean the same thing. Even Kindergarten aged kids can understand this concept.

We have many cases of digraphs that create multiple ways to write the same sound. For example, *ey* and *ay* can both say /ā/. This enables us to be able to spell homophones like *prey* and *pray* differently. *Prey* retains the *ey* because of it's links to the word *predator*.

According to research, children who struggle with literacy gain the most from studying this kind of meaning based morphology.

Typically, we teach children that our language is comprised of mostly regular words, but some irregular words that just need to be learned by rote. Peter explained that actually, this is poor science. A scientific theory can not state that there is a rule, and then that there is a pile of exceptions to the rule.

Peter expounded that we need to change our frame of reference. If we look at spelling as a representation of sound, then there are many inconsistencies. However, if we look at spelling as a way to represent meaning, then all of a sudden, all of those strangely spelled 'sight words' become logical.

**Hypothesis # 1:**  
The *primary* job of spelling is to represent **sound**.  
...and it is a system with a large number of "exceptions"

**BUT...**  
To scientists, "exceptions" should be taken as **falsification** of the hypothesis, and thus reason to seek a better description of the data.

**Well established theory:**  
The *primary* job of spelling is to represent **meaning**.

Peter shared an activity that he does with Grade 1 level children where they look at word families. They start with a keyword. They break it down at the phonic level, then they look at it at the morphemic and orthographic level. The children then decide which other words belong to the same *family* as the keyword. In this case, they started with the word *stay*. Words like *overstay*, *staying* and *stayed* belong in the family. Words like *days* and *stick* do not because although they have similar graphemes they do not share meaning.

## How does a word get to be part of a family? Some banks of words to investigate!

### Connections in “structure and meaning”



wordtorque

Throughout the workshop, attendees were encouraged to ask questions and share thoughts. There were some virtual breakout sessions also where attendees were able to connect in small groups and work together through some activities.

Feedback from the conference was excellent. Members loved Peter’s interactive style and they loved the breakout sessions as it enabled the type of networking you would normally expect at a live conference.

After the conference, many felt that while the information was excellent, more information was needed to apply it successfully in an OG environment. The board is looking at bringing Dr. Bowers back for another online webinar this fall.

There are many more resources featured on Dr. Bowers’ website. However here are a few he highly recommended.

- Dr. Bowers’ Book [How the written word works](#).
- [Rebecca Loveless](#).
- Lyn Anderson – [Beyond the word](#).
- Anne Whiting – [Word Nerderly](#)
- Mrs. Stevens - [Grade 5 class blog](#).
- Gina Cooke has some excellent TED-Ed videos. Here is a link to the [first one](#)

**Note:** The purpose of this document is to give CATT-OG members a flavour of the learning at this year's Spring Fling. Due to this, there are no citations included in this document for research backing up Dr. Bowers' work. Information on supporting research can be found [here](#) (scroll down to the bottom of the page.)