

A SPELLING RULE

RAMONA J. QUINCUNX

Spelling English words correctly is not the easiest thing in the world. To help students of the language master the intricacies of orthography, a number of simple, logical rules that govern spelling have been devised. One of these rules concerns the IE and EI diphthongs. The following jingle sets that rule forth clearly and concisely, telling us which words to write with IE and which ones to write with EI:

Place "I" before "E"
Except after "C"
Or when sounded like "A"
As in "neighbor" or "weight".

The first two lines of the jingle have been represented even more concisely in a word such as SPLICE or THRICE. Looking at these words, one sees immediately that the diphthong following a "C" must begin with "E", whereas the diphthong following any other letter, including the letters "S", "P", "L", "T", "H", and "R", among others, must begin with an "I".

English instructors display implicit confidence in the almost universal applicability of the rule. One English text that comes to hand (Understanding and Using English, Revised and Enlarged Edition, by Newman B. Birk and Genevieve B. Birk, The Odyssey Press, New York, 1951) states that "words spelled with IE or EI are nearly always spelled correctly according to the old rhyme".

To observe the rule in operation, let's take a typical English word, one which just happens to include both of the diphthongs: ONEIROMANCIES, the various forms of practicing divination by means of dreams. The first diphthong does not follow a "C" and is not sounded like "A" (it is pronounced "I"). Therefore, it should be written "IE". Yet, it is written "EI". The second diphthong follows a "C". Therefore, it should be written "EI". Yet, it is written "IE". Evidently, the rule so glibly repeated by English teachers needs a very careful examination. As far as I know, such an examination has never appeared in print. The purpose of this article is to do what is necessary: present a study of the most widely quoted of all spelling rules.

To begin with, it needs to be understood that the first two lines of the jingle are meant to apply only to those diphthongs pronounced like a long "E", and the last two lines only to those diphthongs pronounced like a long "A". There is a multitude of words in which the diphthongs
have all sorts of other sounds. Such words are not covered by the jingle, one way or the other.

With this limitation in mind, the following examples of the applicability of the jingle are typical of those usually cited.

Words illustrating Line 1 include BELIEVE, CHEFTAIN, FIENDISH, NIECE, SHRIEK, and YIELD. Words illustrating Line 2 include CEILING, CEILOMETER, CONCEITED, DECEITFUL, PERCEIVE, and RECEIPT. Words illustrating Line 3, in addition to the two mentioned in Line 4, include DEIGN, EIGHTH, GEISHA, HEINOUS, SLEIGH, and VEILED.

Lines 2, 3, and 4 present exceptions to the general rule stated in Line 1. Therefore, it is to be surmised that most English words are written with the diphthong "IE". A survey shows that there are, indeed, many such words. A list of 60 of the most common basic such words follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACHIEVE</td>
<td>ADDED</td>
<td>BONDED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BALLADIER</td>
<td>BOMBER</td>
<td>BRIEF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELIEVE</td>
<td>BIER</td>
<td>BRIGADIER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIER</td>
<td>BOMBARDIER</td>
<td>CARIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOMBARDIER</td>
<td>BRIEF</td>
<td>CASHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARIES</td>
<td>CAVALIER</td>
<td>CHEVALIER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAVALIER</td>
<td>CHANCELER</td>
<td>CHEYSLER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHANCELER</td>
<td>CHEF</td>
<td>CHIEF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHEYSLER</td>
<td>CLAVIER</td>
<td>CONGIRIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONGIRIES</td>
<td>CONSPIRE</td>
<td>CONSPIER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are "basic" words, as contrasted with "derived" words. In many instances, several words have been derived from a basic word. Thus, the basic word GRIEVE gives us derived words such as GRIEF, GRIEVANCE, and GRIEVOS. Similarly, the basic word NIECE leads to the derived words GRANDNIECE, GREATNIECE, and STEPNIECE. The vowel order in a derived word is always the same as in the corresponding basic word, making it unnecessary to list derived words in this article.

Two words have been single-asterisked. They are representative of a large number of verbal past tenses and participial adjectives ending in -IED and similarly pronounced: CANDIED, FERRIED, MUMMIED, and so on. Four other words have been double-asterisked. They are analogues of a large number of noun plurals ending in -IES and similarly pronounced: FLUNKIES, JIFFIES, PARTIES, and so forth. The inclusion of these two word groups in our list, in masse, would swell that list to mountainous proportions.
Line 2 confronts us with the exception applicable to those words in which the long "E" sound is preserved: if the preceding consonant is a "C", the order of the vowels in the diphthong is reversed and becomes "EI". The implication is that there are many English words exhibiting this phenomenon. Actually, there are only 5 basic such words:

**CEILING** **CONCEIVE** **DECEIVE** **PERCEIVE** **RECEIVE**

Each of them, of course, has its derivatives, some of them given in the following table:

- **CEILING**: ceil, ceilinged, ceilometer, underceiling
- **CONCEIVE**: conceit, conceited, misconceive, preconceive
- **DECEIVE**: deceit, deceitful, redeceive, undeceive
- **PERCEIVE**: apperceive, misperceive, preperceive, reperceive
- **RECEIVE**: interreceive, misreceive, pre receive, receipt

We have already seen that the semantically interesting word **ONEIROMANCIES**, even if we exclude its first diphthong from consideration because it does not have the long "E" sound, violates the Line 2 rule. Are there other exceptions to the rules in the first two lines of the jingle?

Indeed, there are. English texts cite **EITHER**, **LEISURE**, **NEITHER**, and **SEIZE** as words defying Line 1, and **FINANCIER** as a word defying Line 2. That is a beginning, but only a beginning. There follows a comprehensive list of the more common words spelled in opposition to the rule of Line 1. As before, it includes basic words only, but the standard of commonness has been relaxed somewhat, and important proper nouns have been admitted, in order to demonstrate the extent to which violations of Line 1 are found in our language.

**CAFFEINE**
**CASSIOPEIA** - a northern constellation, also called Cassiopeia’s Chair
**CODEINE**
**DEIL** - a mischievous fellow: a Scottish term
**DEIRDRE** - a feminine first name
**DUNLEITH** - a small town near Greenville, Mississippi
**EITHER**
**HYGEIA** - the Greek goddess of health
**INVEIGLE**
**KEITH** - a masculine first name
**LEIF** - a masculine first name
**LEIGH** - a masculine first name
**LEIR** - erudition: a Scottish term
**LEISHMANIASIS** - a tropical skin disease
**LEISTER** - a three-pronged fishing spear
**LEISURE**
**LEITCH** - William Leighton Leitch, Scottish water-color painter, 1804 - 1883
**LEITH** - the port section of Edinburgh, Scotland
Leitrim - a county in the northern part of Ireland
Ligeia - the title and heroine of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe
Moneth - a large, usually silver, punch bowl with a scalloped rim
Neif - the fist or hand: a Scottish term
Neil - a masculine first name
Neither
Pharmacopoeia - a book of standard drug formulas
Plebeian
Pleiad - one of a cluster of seven brilliant persons
Reid - a masculine first name
Reims - a city in northeastern France, also spelled Rheims
Reitbok - the reedbuck, an antelope of southern Africa
Seize
Sheik
Sheila - a feminine first name
Teil - the linden tree
Teind - a tithe or tithes: a Scottish term
Weir - a dam placed in a stream
Weird

These are basic words, and many of them have derivatives. Examples:

Inveigle: inveiglement, inveigler
Leisure: leisureless, leisureliness, leisurely, leisure-time
Seize: seizin, seizure
Sheik: sheikdom, sheikly
Weird: weirdie, weirdly, weirdness, weirdo

The next list is a sampling of words that violate Line 2 of our jingle. Each uses the "IE" diphthong immediately following a "C", although that diphthong has the sound of a long "E". Some of the words in this specimen list end in -CIES or in -MANCES. There are many hundreds of additional words in each of the two groups. They have been omitted to keep the list within reasonable bounds.

Agencies
Audienier - an auditing officer in the court of chancery
Ciel - a pale or light blue
Disprivacyed - deprived of privacy
Fancied
Farcie - stuffed, as a pepper with forcemeat
Farcied - suffering from farcy, a contagious disease affecting horses
Financier
Legacied
Marcie - a feminine first name
Mercies
Muncie - a city in eastern Indiana
Necromancies - forms of black magic or sorcery
Oneiromancies - forms of divination by means of dreams
Percies - a plural of Percy, the masculine first name
Plancier - the underside of a cornice

Including all letter combinations and word stems in these lists would seem to make the handful of cases noted previously almost insignificant.

Up to this point in the jingle we have not considered words whose long "E" diphthong has been preceded by an "E", "I", or "Y". All examples of such words given elsewhere are also included in this list. (One such word, "Sieve", is also included here.)

One such word, "Shieve", is included here. Some supposed examples are excluded, such as "Feave", and "Mucve", which should have been included in our survey, on the grounds that they contained nonbasic words; thus "Feave", which clearly is derived from "squeeze", and "Mucve", which is logistically derived from "mucve".

In words such as "Feave" and "Mucve", and in words derived from "Feave", "Mucve", words of Greek origin are included:

In words of Greek origin are included:

Joie de vivre, the jingle of our jingles.
Up to this point, we have considered only those words in which the diphthong has the sound of a long "E". Before turning to the problem posed by other pronunciations, two further special categories of words must be excluded.

One such category is represented by words in which the letters "EI" and "IE" are juxtaposed, in either order, but in which they belong to different syllables and are separately pronounced. The jingle was not intended to cover such words, and no rule regarding the order of the vowels could have any meaning or validity for such words. Half a dozen contrasting examples:

- BEING and BIENNIAL
- NARCEINE and SCIENCE
- DEICE and DIET

There are hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of such words, and it is unfortunate that it is impossible, not just practically but even theoretically, to formulate a rule governing vowel order in such words.

The second category to be excluded consists of words in which the "EI" or "IE" combination is part of three consecutive vowels. There simply aren't enough words with such a three-vowel combination to permit the formulation of an effective rule. However, a preliminary survey indicates that most such words fall into two categories: those derived from French, and those derived from Greek.

In words of French origin, the order is generally "IE": ADIEU, JOIE DE VIVRE, LIEU, LIEUTENANT, PURLEUS, SIEUR. In words of Greek origin, the order is generally "EI": ONAMATOPOEIA, PROSOPOPOEIA, MELOPOEIA, RHYTHMOPOEIA, PHARMACOPOEIA.

We can now return to our jingle and examine its third component: words in which the diphthong has the sound of a long "A". For once, the jingle seems to be exactly right: all words in this classification...
are, indeed, spelled "EI":

BEIGE FREIGHT OBEISANCE SEINE
BEIRUT GEISHA PEIGNoir SKEIN
DEIGN HEINous PEIPING SLEIGH
EIGHT INVEIGH REIGN VEIL
FEIGN NEIGH REIN VEIN
FEINT NEIGHBOR REINDEER WEIGH

To this list we can add the somewhat rarer word TEIGLACH, small pieces of dough boiled in honey.

We have covered the territory of the jingle in its entirety. Let us now go on to explore virgin territory.

In some words, the "IE" or "EI" diphthong has the sound of a short "I". This sound does not ever seem to occur after the letter "C". In the words in which it does occur, the spelling may be either "IE" or "EI":

EI:
COUNTERFEIT
FOREIGN
FORFEIT
SOVEREIGN
SURFEIT
VERMEIL

IE:
HANDKERCHIEF
KerCHIEF
MISCHIEF
NECKERCHIEF
SIEVE
TIENTSIN

In other words, the diphthong has the sound of a short "E". If it follows a "C", the spelling is always "IE":

ANCIENT EFFICIENT OMNISCIENCE
CONSCIENCE GLACIER PROFICIENCY
DEFICIENCY NESCIENCE SUFFICIENT

If it does not follow a "C", the spelling may be either "IE" or "EI":

EI:
HEIFER
HEIR
LEICESTER
NONPAREIL
THEIR

IE:
BRAZIER
CLOTHIER
FRIEND
GLAZIER
SOLDIER

In one word, the diphthong has the Italian "A" sound and is written "EI": ENCEINTE.

In one word and its derivatives, the diphthong has the sound of a long "U" and is written "IE":

VIEW: overview, preview, purview, review, viewer

In many English words, the diphthong has the sound of a long "I". This sound appears never to occur after a "C", and the normal speling of the dipthong of words in question:

DEFIED
DRIES
FIERY

The list could be expanded, as evidenced by:
BRUNEI
EIDER
EIDETIC
EIDOLON
EIFFEL TOWER
EIGENVALUE
EINSTEIN
EPILOGUE

It is worth noting that some words ending in -IE are mostly longer because there are shorter and of odd, and some are shorter because there are longer.

The true source of the next problem is the original one, with respect to the ending of Word Ways, as evidenced by:

1. Why should "ie" be written as "ei"? (6)
2. Why should "ei" be written as "ie"? (5)
3. Why should "ei" be written as "ie"? (5)
4. Why should "ie" be written as "ei"? (6)
5. Why should "ei" be written as "ie"? (5)
The sound of a long "I" normal spelling of the diphthong is "IE". A short but representative list of the words in question follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEFIED</th>
<th>HIERARCHY</th>
<th>PIEBALD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DRIES</td>
<td>LIE</td>
<td>REPLIED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIERY</td>
<td>MAGPIE</td>
<td>SKIES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The list could be increased enormously in length by adding more words ending in -IED or in -IES.

There is, however, a substantial number of exceptions to this rule, as evidenced by the following list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRUNEI</th>
<th>FAHRENHEIT</th>
<th>OPHICLEIDE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EIDER</td>
<td>GEGENSCEIN</td>
<td>POLTERGEIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIDETIC</td>
<td>GEIGER COUNTER</td>
<td>SEISMOGRAPH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIDOLON</td>
<td>HEIGHT</td>
<td>SLEIGHT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIFFEL TOWER</td>
<td>HEIST</td>
<td>STEIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIGENVALUE</td>
<td>LAMMERGEIER</td>
<td>STEINBOK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EINSTEIN</td>
<td>LEITMOTIV</td>
<td>STEINMETZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPEIROGENY</td>
<td>MEIOSIS</td>
<td>STEINMETZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ONEIROMANCY</td>
<td>WEIMARANER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that the words on the first list are mostly rather short and of Old English or Latin origin, while those on the second list are mostly longer and of German or Greek origin. We say "mostly", because there are exceptions on both lists, but the trends are quite evident.

The true situation has now been assessed pretty accurately, and the next problem is to compose a new jingle, probably longer than the original one, which shall faithfully reflect the rules actually operative with respect to writing "IE" or "EI". Send your drafts to the editor of *Word Ways*, for future publication.

**LETTER RIDDLES**

1. Why is the letter D like a hoop of gold? Because we cannot be weD without it.
2. Why is the letter F like a cow's tail? Because it comes at the end of beeF.
3. Why is the letter T like Easter? Because it occurs at the end of LenT.
4. Which two letters are definitely not hard? The letters E-Z (= easy, phonetically).
5. Why is D like a squalling child? Because it makes ma maD.