

SILVERY DISCOVERY? GLITTERY TRUMPERY

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

In the March 1983 issue of *Omni* magazine, the International Paper Company presented a two-page advertisement containing various spelling tips by novelist John Irving. To help the bad speller gain confidence, he suggested the following rule:

What about -ary or -ery? Just remember that there are only six common words in English that end in -ery. Memorize them, and feel fairly secure that all the rest end in -ary: cemetery, millinery, distillery, monastery, confectionery, stationery (as in paper).

Secure? In their book Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English (Brown University Press, 1967), Henry Kučera and W. Nelson Francis noted 2579 occurrences of words ending in -ery in their million-word corpus, of which only 20 were examples of Irving's six words!

To be fair, Irving probably assumes that even poor spellers know how to spell every and very, which together account for half of the -ery occurrences. A list of the next most common -ery words:

60 machinery, 46 artery, 45 discovery, 39 mystery, 33 slavery, 31 gallery, 29 recovery, 19 delivery, 18 battery, 16 pottery, 15 misery, cemetery, 14 cannery, scenery, 13 nursery, 11 artillery, 10 imagery, mastery, robbery, 9 grocery, 7 fiery, 6 quackery, surgery, 5 butchery, livery, periphery, slippery, 4 bravery, celery, embroidery, snobbery, 3 adultery, cheery, flattery, peppery, powdery, upholstery, watery, 2 bakery, brewery, coppery, drapery, mockery, monastery, ornery, silvery, stationery, 1 archery, blustery, chicanery, drudgery, dysentery, feathery, fishery, forgery, jittery, leathery, lechery, lottery, millinery, papery, perfumery, query, raillery, rubbery, savagery, shivery, slavery, spidery, splintery

This by no means exhausts the stockpile of -ery words; the following reasonably well-known words did not occur in the million-word sample:

beanery, beery, bindery, blistery, Bowery, bribery, briery, buffoonery, cajolery, cindery, colliery, confectionery, cookery, crockery, cutlery, deanery, demagoguery, distillery, dodderly, eatery, effrontery, emery, finery, flowery, fluttery, frippery, glittery, greenery, gunnery, hatchery, heathery, japery, knavery, lechery, leery, Margery, midwifery, mummery, napery, nunnery, popery, presbytery, prudery, psaltery, puffery,

quivery, refinery, rookery, saddlery, showery, skulduggery, smeltery, stitchery, summery, tannery, thievery, tindery, toggery, tottery, tracery, treachery, trickery, trumpery, vinery, wavery, winery, witchery

There are, in fact, 530 different -ery words listed in the Air Force Reverse Dictionary (based on Webster's Second Edition); no doubt a search of the OED and other dictionaries would reveal others.

Is there any possibility of formulating a rule that will unambiguously differentiate between -ary and -ery words? Alas, there will always be exceptions to such a rule, for there are several words in which both spellings are allowed. In the case of bloomery/bloomary, lamasery/lamasary, rosery/rosary and condensery/condensary, the words are merely alternative spellings; however, the combinations very/vary, bleery/bleary, stationery/stationary, ambery/ambary, palmery/palmary, summery/summary, saltery/saltary, confectionery/confectionary, ternery/ternary and revery/revary all refer to distinct concepts.

John Irving's second spelling rule fared somewhat better:

Here's another easy rule. Only four words end in -efy. Most people misspell them - with -ify, which is usually correct. Just memorize these, too, and use -ify for all the rest: stup-efy, liquefy, putrefy, rarefy.

Of the 23 -efy words listed in the Air Force Reverse Dictionary, only six are common: Irving's four examples, plus **defy** and **beefy**. There are no matched pairs of words spelled -ify and -efy, but some come close: putrefy/petrify, rarefy/verify, madefy/ladify, tumefy/humify, casefy/gasify, patefy/ratify, beefy/deify and tepefy/typify.

English is a polyglot language, having assimilated words from many sources; it has always defied attempts to summarize spelling in a few simple rules. The most famous of these rules, the "i before e" jingle, was shown to be riddled with exceptions in the August 1974 **Word Ways**; a reasonably accurate rule is hopelessly complicated. Even a "u after q" rule cannot be relied upon; the May 1976 **Word Ways** lists a page of exceptions. The February 1980 issue reported on The Editorial Eye's attempt to give simple rules for distinguishing -able words from -ible ones; these too were full of exceptions.

The editor is much indebted to R. Merrill Ely of Chicago for calling John Irving's pronouncements to his attention; in writing to the International Paper Company about the -efy rule, he commented "I think this ad should have been submitted to a word expert before printing". **Word Ways** couldn't agree more.