

---

## Visual-Spatial Learners and the Challenge of Spelling

---

Alexandra Shires Golon

When I present to teachers and parents, I have a Peanuts© cartoon I use that shows Charlie Brown in bed thinking, “Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Then a voice comes to me that says, ‘I before E, except after C!’” My poor son spent a lot of time memorizing this rule. Then he misspelled “species” on his test because he kept spelling it, “speceis.” (He did follow the rule, though, right?) Who makes up these crazy spelling rules, anyway? There are so many words that are spelled with rules that are broken or that make no sense—it seems ridiculous to have the rule in the first place!

Spelling seems to be universally challenging for visual-spatial children and adults. Thank goodness for spell checkers. For those who think in images, not words, it can be very difficult to create pictures that incorporate letters, particularly pictures that will live on as memorable images in the visual learner’s mind. Color is a great tool for accomplishing this. Taking the “IE” in FRIEND and making them a different color, even larger type, helps to secure the rule, or for them the image, that, in this instance, the I precedes the E. This is an effective trick for nearly all spelling words, particularly those with unusual or rule-breaking spelling. A former colleague of mine taught her students to actually place “rule-breaking” spelling words in jail, behind bars. The image of the word having been imprisoned for breaking the rules would stick in their memory. Here’s one for the word, “reign” because the “g” is a rule breaker, serving little purpose in the spelling of the word:



However, if color or jail bars don’t secure the image, try adding characters around the letters and creating a whole silly story around the word itself. Remember, humor will engage the right hemisphere; color and size will help it to be retained. For example,



## FRIEND

“These FRies from FRIday’s sure taste good at the day’s end!”

“You’re right, FRIend!”

Or, as a mum in New Zealand recommended to me, try typing each spelling word you have on your computer in a different font. Pick a font that matches the feeling or mood of your word. So, serendipitous which sounds like a fun and interesting word, might look like this: *Serendipitous* Just be sure to use a font you can read!

If your visual-spatial students have successfully created an image of the word in their minds, they will be able to spell that word forward and backward. To test whether the image they have created has a permanent, retrievable place in their memory (or file cabinet, as my son would say), ask your students to spell the word in reverse. If they can’t do it, they need to work on some other technique (color, humor, size, etc.) to secure their image of the word until they are able to spell it correctly forward and backward.

### **A Visualization Approach to Spelling\***

\*Borrowed from Neurolinguistic Programming

1. Write the spelling word in large print with bright-colored ink on a white piece of paper with the difficult part of the word written in a different color.
2. Hold the card in front of you as far as your arm can reach, a little bit above your eyes.
3. Study the word carefully, then close your eyes and see if you can picture the word in your imagination.
4. Now, do something wild and crazy to the word in your imagination – the sillier the better. (You could make it colorful, have the letters act like people or animals—anything that will help you remember how the word is spelled.)
5. Place the word somewhere in space, in front of you or above your head. Remember that there is an infinite amount of space around you that can hold an equally infinite number of words.
6. Spell your word backward with your eyes closed. Was there an even rhythm between the letters? Good! That means you are really looking at your picture.
7. Now spell your word forward with your eyes closed.
8. Open your eyes and write the word **once**.

9. Close your eyes again and see if your word is still where you placed it in space. It will stay there forever!

(Golon, 2005)

It is not unusual for visual-spatial learners to have difficulty with spelling, so I want you to consider this. See if you can read the following paragraph. Don't try very hard, just quickly read the words:

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deson't mttar waht oredr ltteers in a wrod apear, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltter be in the rghit pclae. The oethr ltteers can be a cmolpeet mses and you can sitll raed the wrod!

Apaprnelty, the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter, but raeds the wrod as a wlohe. Ins't taht amzanig? So mcuh for the ipmorante of spleing!

Something to think about if your student has difficulty spelling!

**Alexandra "Allie" Golon** is Director of the Visual-Spatial Resource, a subsidiary of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, in Denver, Colorado and Marketing Director for the Gifted Development Center. As a founding member of the Visual-Spatial Resource Access Team, a former G/T teacher and homeschooling parent to two exceptionally gifted visual-spatial learners, Allie brings a wealth of experience to her books, *Raising Topsy-Turvy Kids: Successfully Parenting Your Visual-Spatial Child* and, *If You Could See the Way I Think: A Handbook for Visual-Spatial Kids*. Her upcoming release, *The Visual-Spatial Classroom: An Approach that Engages Every Learner*, is a rich source for classroom strategies that will help every student succeed, regardless of preferred learning style. Allie has been invited to present on parenting and teaching visual-spatial learners at state, national and international venues. She has appeared on talk radio programs and in various print media. Allie can be reached at [alex@visualspatial.org](mailto:alex@visualspatial.org) or [agolon@gifteddevelopment.com](mailto:agolon@gifteddevelopment.com). For more information, please visit [www.VisualSpatial.org](http://www.VisualSpatial.org).

©Copyright held by Alexandra Shires Golon (2004). From Golon, A.S., *If You Could See the Way I Think: A Handbook for Visual-Spatial Kids*, Denver (2005): Visual-Spatial Resource.