

Table 6.1. Proportion of alternative spellings of vowel sounds

Although the most common way of writing each vowel sound is with one letter, in a comparatively small proportion of words, the vowel sound is written with two letters. Children often have difficulty knowing which vowels to use. The following calculations, compiled by Elsie Smelt (1976), were based on the Stanford Spelling Study (Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971). The study used more than "17,000 words (from a core vocabulary containing most of the words used by educated speakers and writers)" (Hanna et al., 1971, p. 80). Teach children to rely on the most commonly used letter-sound correspondences.

The sound . . .	Is written as . . .	In X% of words	Examples
/ā/	a	80	male, vacation
	ai	9	nail
	ay	6	day
/ē/*	e	72	me, zero
	ee	10	deep
	ea	10	heal
/ī/	i	74	hide, pilot
	y	14	try
	igh	6	sigh
/ō/	o	87	hope, hobo
	oa	5	boat
	ow	5	low
/ōō/	u	90	tune, mute, cupid
	ew	3	new
	eu	2	feud
	ue	2	due
/ă/	a	100	hat
/ē/	e	93	bet
	ea	4	head
/ī/	i	73	hid
	y	23	funny, symphony*
/ō/	o	95	hot
/ū/	u	88	hut

From Smelt, E. (1976). *Speak, spell and read English* (p. 102). Melbourne: Longman Australia; adapted by permission.

*Many dictionaries that were published before the 1980s gave the final letter y as in *funny* or *muddy* the short /ī/ sound. This grapheme is now pronounced more frequently as long /ē/, especially in the Midwest and western United States.

about "rules" that are actually not orthographic rules. Melvyn Ramsden cautioned teachers that "if you find an 'exception' don't blame the system—you might have got [*sic*] your 'rule' wrong" (2001, p. 11). For example, teachers often say, "When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking." Smelt (1976) found that this statement is only true 37% of the time; it works for *ai*, *oa*, *ay*, and *ee* but not for *oo*, *oy*, *ew*, *au*, and *aw*.