

## < foreword & forward >

Why are the words <foreword & forward> pronounced the same but spelled differently? Is this an example of inconsistency in the English spelling system?

Absolutely not. These words are spelled differently for a very good reason: in English, when two words sound the same but mean different things, they will be spelled differently whenever possible. As Pete Bowers often says, this is not a flaw in our system; it's a feature. It's called the homophone principle.

English has many homophones—words that are pronounced the same but mean different things. Here are just a few examples:

brows, browse  
meat, meet  
there, their, they're  
or, ore, oar  
prints, prince  
weak, week  
plain, plane  
sight, site, cite

You can probably think of dozens more; homophones are everywhere in English.

Since the primary purpose of spelling is to allow us to quickly understand the meaning of words, it's logical and appropriate that homophones in English have different spellings. Because of the difference in spelling, we can immediately grasp the difference in meaning between <foreword & forward>. If they were spelled the same simply because they are pronounced the same, our writing system would be far less effective.

Homophones appear to be a problem only because of a misunderstanding—prevalent in our education system—that the primary purpose of English spelling is to represent *pronunciation*. You might even hear people say that this is research-based, established fact. It's not.

But as a result of this misunderstanding, literacy instruction often asks students to memorize many abstract details about English spelling in isolation, including all the ways to pronounce a letter or combination of letters (a grapheme), and all the ways to spell a meaningful segment of speech (a phoneme). Or even worse, words are just memorized one by one with no understanding of any elements of the coherent system that explains their spelling.

With either approach, students are forced to memorize the spelling of many words. This is true even within structured literacy approaches that teach students to spell words by analyzing their sound structure and applying in-depth knowledge of the various ways to spell those sounds. In-depth understanding of the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is vital for struggling students, but after learning all the ways to spell a “long o,” how is a student supposed to know that <tone> isn't spelled \*<toan>? Why isn't <improvise> spelled \*<improvize>? Why is it <move> and not \*<moove>? In the absence of

any context for those choices, students are forced to memorize details of almost every spelling.

In fact, structures are primary in English spelling and the pronunciation of a word is the final consideration. The presence of a particular letter or combination of letters in a word makes sense *only* if we look at the word's structure (morphology) and its relationship to other words (etymology) *before* we start trying to understand the way its pronunciation is represented in spelling (its orthographic phonology).

As an example, let's take a look at <foreword>. The spelling of this word follows the constraints of English spelling; first and foremost, it represents what the word means by combining *elements* in consistent and predictable ways. (Elements are the written form of morphemes, the units of meaning in English words.)

In the word <foreword> we have two elements — two written units of meaning:

foreword → fore + word

Both of these elements are free bases (meaning that they exist as standalone words) so this word is a compound. The first base is <fore> which has a sense of “front or before in time, rank or position.” A golfer yells “Fore!” to warn the golfers in front of him or her.

The base <fore> shows up in lots of compounds including:

foremost  
foreshadowing  
forearm  
forehead  
foresight  
forefathers  
forewarned

The elements <fore> and <word> combine to form the meaning of <foreword>: “a short introduction to a book” — the *words* at the *front* of the book.

So then, what is the structure of <forward> which is pronounced the same but spelled differently? Here we also have two elements:

forward → for + ward

The first element in this construction is a free base, but I'm not sure whether the second—<ward>—is a suffix or a bound base.

(This is not <ward> as in "a ward of the court" or "to ward off danger." That free base is a different element and is related to the word <guard> historically.)

I'm looking for further evidence to learn more about whether <ward> in <forward> is a base or a suffix in present day English. But it's just fine (and inevitable) to have open questions about particular elements and words in English. What I do know—from evidence about the etymology, or history, of this word—is that this element <ward> comes from a root that has a

sense of "turn, bend" and it provides a general sense of "in the direction of" when it is added to words:

eastward  
westward  
backward  
forward  
onward  
inward  
outward  
windward  
toward  
awkward

When the word <awkward> entered English in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, it meant "in the wrong direction" and was formed from the base <awk>—which meant "back-handed"—combined with <ward>. ([See the etymonline.com entry for awkward.](#))

In all of these words <ward> is spelled the same even though it is not always pronounced the same. Notice its pronunciation in *toward*.

The word <toward> is often taught as a "rule-breaker" word that has to be memorized, but the spelling of this word is completely logical if we look at its structure:

out + ward → outward  
in + ward → inward  
back + ward → backward  
to + ward → toward

When I show the structure of <toward> to students, they often say "but we don't pronounce it *to - ward*." And they're right, we don't. But they already know how to pronounce <toward>. What they don't know is how to spell it! To do that, they need to understand that the primary purpose of spelling is to efficiently represent meaning. As a result, the spelling of written units of meaning (elements) in words will remain constant while pronunciation may vary. When we understand what drives spelling, the spelling <toward> makes sense AND our understanding of the meaning of *toward* deepens.

But what about the <for> in <forward>? [The history of the word](#) tells us that in Old English, this was spelled *forewearde*. The <for> in <forward> has the same origin as <fore> with a sense of "front or before." And <forward> has a sense of "moving toward the front." So why isn't it spelled \*<foreward>? (Note that the \* in front of a spelling such as \*<foreward> means that this is not the standard spelling we find in English.)

I don't know for sure why this word evolved to be spelled <forward> without an <e> after the <or>, but I DO know that spelling evolves to clarify meaning. The spelling \*<foreward> could be easily confused with <foreword>, so perhaps this word evolved to have a slightly different spelling of the first element in order to make it easier to distinguish <forward> and <foreword>. It's also interesting to note that many words with <ward> are formed with prepositions (<inward, outward, upward, downward>) so the spelling <for> seems to be

coherent with that pattern. After doing research on these words, I'm interested in learning more about the spelling of the <for> in <forward> because a completely different explanation for its evolution may turn up and surprise me. But even forming that hypothesis and talking it through with a student helps us both understand and remember this word, the productive elements within it, and — most importantly — how our spelling system actually works.

Once we have looked at the structure and relatives of these words, we can turn to their orthographic phonology — the way that the meaningful segments of pronunciation in those words are spelled.

We can see that the <e> in <fore> is not in this word to represent any part of the pronunciation. The words <for, nor & or> provide evidence that English base elements that end in <or> don't need an <e> to signal their pronunciation. However, it's interesting and illuminating to notice that English bases seem to have evolved to have a final <e> following an <or> if they are content words.

A final, single, unpronounced <e> in English has many functions, and here is one of them. This is a *lexicalizing <e>* because it marks these words as *lexical* or *content* words. Content words carry specific meaning in our language and this category can include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. These are all content words:

store  
more  
fore  
lore  
wore  
shore  
tore  
and on and on.

There are only a few English base elements that end in the letters <or> and they are almost all function words. Function words often create a grammatical context for the content words in our language. This category can include prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, articles, and auxiliary verbs:

or  
nor  
for

No memorization is needed to spell these words from now on. We need an understanding of 1) the meaningful speech segments that can be represented by <or>, 2) word forms and functions that span a continuum between content words and function words — a concept that is hugely productive for grammar, spelling, and literacy in general, and 3) the orthographic conventions at work in words that contain <or>.

And we can conclude that the <e> is probably absent in <forward> to help distinguish meaning.

Now we can go deeper into making sense of the relationship between spelling and pronunciation in these words.

One question we might ask is this: why do we pronounce the <word> in <foreword> and the <ward> in <forward> the same?

The answer has to do with *stress*. Both <forward> and <foreword> are stressed on the first syllable. When a syllable is stressed, we generally pronounce it louder and emphasize it more. We say FORward. And the vowel pronunciation in a stressed syllable is often clearer and more like the “expected” pronunciation of that vowel grapheme. An <or> in a *stressed* syllable is usually pronounced like <store, torn, historic> (unless it follows a <w>, when it has a different, consistent pronunciation as in <word, worm, worth, worse>.)

On the other hand, an *unstressed* <or> is typically pronounced as in these words:

actor  
inventor

And an *unstressed* <ar> is generally pronounced the same:

dollar  
vineyard

Understanding stress and the "neutral vowel" pronunciation (the *schwa*) is critical for understanding spelling. We can't predict the spelling of a neutral vowel in a pronounced word in isolation. We have to look at the structure of a word and its relationship to other words, as we have done with <forward & foreword>.

By the way, notice that the word <vineyard> is another illustration of the fact that we can't start with pronunciation to predict the spelling of a word and that the spelling of English elements stays consistent even when their pronunciation changes. Think for a moment about the spelling of <vineyard>. If the notion that spelling is driven primarily by pronunciation were true, then why isn't <vineyard> spelled \*<vinyerd>? It's easy to see that if we did spell it that way, we would not see its meaning as clearly; a vineyard is a bit like a “yard full of vines” and although the pronunciation of <vine> and <yard> shift when they form a compound, we still spell them the same, which allows the meaning to shine through. *That's how English works!!*

So why does this matter? Well, here's the truth about instruction that starts with pronunciation of isolated words: when we teach words in isolation, we force students to do far more rote memorization than we realize. But when we study words in families by starting with their structure and then examining their relationships to other words, students can learn the meaning and spelling of an element (such as <ward>), which enables them to understand and remember the spelling of many words.

And we can improve the study of the critical relationship between graphemes (like <or> and <ar>) and their pronunciations. These critical, abstract relationships are very difficult for many struggling students to remember, and it's even more difficult to apply them in complex words without a lot of rote memorization. Providing an accurate context—structures and relationships between words—for these relationships makes them concrete and meaningful.

And the same students who are lousy at rote memorization often excel at seeing and understanding meaningful relationships.

So we can effectively learn about words by

1. thinking about their meaning and identifying their structure — the written units of meaning (elements) that we use to form them
2. looking at their relationship to other words
3. *then* studying the connection between their spelling and pronunciation

In English words, structures are primary. Sequences of written morphemes — elements — are the foundation for the meaning and spelling of words. Relationships between words help us understand why we use specific graphemes — letters and combinations of letters.

And once we understand meaning, structure, and relationships between words, we can understand why we spell the same pronunciation with one grapheme (<or>) in one word and a different grapheme (<ar>) in another word.

If we investigate words in this way, the spelling of individual words makes sense. But more importantly, we begin to understand how our spelling system itself works.

And understanding how our writing system actually works is empowering and illuminating for all of us.

See [eytmonline.com](http://eytmonline.com) for the history of <foreword, forward & awkward>.

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