

## < fasten & hasten >

After studying a word, one of my students created a riddle: “What word means ‘going quickly,’ ‘standing still,’ and ‘not eating’?”

The word he was thinking of was *fast* and his riddle was inspired by studying the spelling of *fasten*.

The written word <fasten> is often described as “irregular” because the <f> is not pronounced. And the pronunciation-spelling relationship seems even more confusing if we compare <fasten> with <hasten>.

Notice their spellings:

fasten

hasten

These words look as though they should rhyme, but they don’t. So why do we pronounce the <a> in <hasten> as a “long a” while the <a> in <fasten> is a “short a”? Can we make sense of the relationship between the spelling and pronunciation in these words by pronouncing them and trying to sound them out? Can we make sense of the relationship by looking at their spellings and trying to “decode” them — dividing by syllable, pronouncing each letter in the word, and blending them together? We can’t. We can’t go directly from pronunciation to spelling — or vice versa — and have these words make sense.

However, we can understand what’s going on by first looking at the structure and relatives of these two words:

fasten → fast + en

hasten → haste/ + en

(The slash mark / at the end of <haste> signals that we replace a final, non-syllabic or non-pronounced <e> at the end of a stem when we add a vowel suffix, as in <drive/ + ing → driving>.)

When my student and I analyzed <fasten>, we both were astonished to realize that it was a complex word built from the base <fast>.

Have you ever thought about the idea that to fasten something means to “make it fast” or “make it firmly fixed or attached”? I certainly never had! Although I knew this particular usage of *fast*, I had never thought of its connection to *fasten*. And this usage of the

word was brand new for my student, who was entranced by the idea that *fast* can have at least three senses including “firmly fixed or attached” as in this example: “The ship was held fast by the rope.”

To *fasten* something is to make it *fast*. To *hasten* is to do something with *haste*. In these two words, the <en> suffix forms a verb and lends the base a sense of “making or becoming.” That <en> suffix has the same function in many other English words. *Harden* means to make harder. *Flatten* means to make flat. Think about *roughen* and *sadden* and *quicken*.

And now we can turn to pronunciation: the pronunciation of the <a> in *fasten* and *hasten* makes sense if we think about the pronunciation of *fast* and *haste*. If we start with the structure, meaning, and relatives of the word, it really doesn’t have to be any more complicated than that.

And do you see the reason that the letter <t> makes sense?

It’s clear that the <t> is needed in the words <fast & haste> to signal the /t/ in their pronunciation. It’s no longer needed for pronunciation after the <en> suffix is added, but in English, whenever possible, spelling remains consistent even when pronunciation varies — a critical factor for reading comprehension. So the <t> is retained in <fasten & hasten> even though it’s not pronounced.

When my student and I encountered the word <fasten>, we analyzed its structure and thought about its relatives before we tried to understand the relationship between its spelling and pronunciation. As a result, my student easily *understood* how to spell <fasten>, expanded his vocabulary, and learned more about how the English spelling system works.

This is why it’s so powerful to start word study of any kind by thinking about the structure and relatives of a word. For every student, at any age, studying structures and relationships before studying the grapheme-phoneme correspondences makes those critical concepts easier to understand.

And who knows, students may even be inspired to create riddles!

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