

## <giant & gigantic>

One of my students was trying to learn <giant> for a spelling test, but when she tried to spell it, she wrote \*<gient>.

This is a very reasonable spelling based on the pronunciation of the word. Think about the pronunciation of *giant*, *agent*, *moment*, *parent*, *distant*, *infant*, *absent*. There's virtually no difference in the pronunciation of those final vowels. They are all the neutral vowel pronunciation we call a schwa.

So when my student tried to spell the word *giant* by starting with its pronunciation, she didn't have any way to understand why it's spelled with <ant> rather than <ent>. She was stuck trying to memorize the vowel <a> by rote and it wasn't going too well.

But the etymology of this word—its history and relationship to other words—makes the reason for that <a> clear and fascinating. The entry for *giant* in etymonline.com begins like this:

### **giant (n.)**

c. 1300, "fabulous man-like creature of enormous size," from Old French *geant*, earlier *jaiant* "giant, ogre" (12c.), from Vulgar Latin *\*gagantem* (nominative *gagas*), from Latin *gigas* "a giant," from Greek *Gigas* (usually in plural, *Gigantes*), one of a race of divine but savage and monstrous beings (personifying destructive natural forces), sons of Gaia and Uranus, eventually destroyed by the gods.

There's clearly a story here. And we can see that this word has a Latin ancestor spelled <gigas>. If we type <gigas> into the etymonline search box, we can see other entries that contain that letter string. And guess what pops up?

### **gigantic (adj.)**

1610s, "pertaining to giants," from Latin *gigant-* stem of *gigas* "giant" (see **giant**) + **-ic**. Replaced earlier *gigantine* (c. 1600), *gigantical* (c. 1600), *giantlike* (1570s). The Latin adjective was *giganteus*. Of material or immaterial things, actions, etc., "of extraordinary size or proportions," by 1797.

The excerpts of these two entries from etymonline.com provide information on the history of these words. And this history allows us to understand why there must be an <a> in <giant>.

Both *giant* and *gigantic* share a historical root—an ancestor. They both derive from Latin *gigas*.

Their history also suggests that we might have expected the word <giant> to be spelled <gigant> if it came to us directly from Latin. But instead, it made its way through French where the /g/ in the middle “elided,” which means that it gradually stopped being pronounced. The spelling evolved to lose that medial letter <g>, so we ended up with <giant> in English rather than <gigant>.

Notice also that in the pronunciation of the related word *gigantic*, the <a> is stressed and clear. So a student who understands the meaning and historical connection between these two words can connect the spelling of <giant> to the spelling and pronunciation of the broader etymological family. Once we see the connection between <giant & gigantic> in terms of meaning, history, structure and their pronunciation, only an <a> makes sense in <giant>.

By the way, during this brief study, my student also learned the meaning of *gigantic*, which was new to her.

Every word in English makes sense, but in order to see it we need to look at the interrelationship between a word’s structure, its relationship to a broader family of words, and THEN its orthographic phonology—the way the spelling signals the meaningful parts of the pronunciation in the spelling.

This shift in perspective allows us to understand how English really works, and has *gigantical* power to help us—and the students we care about—make sense of our language.

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