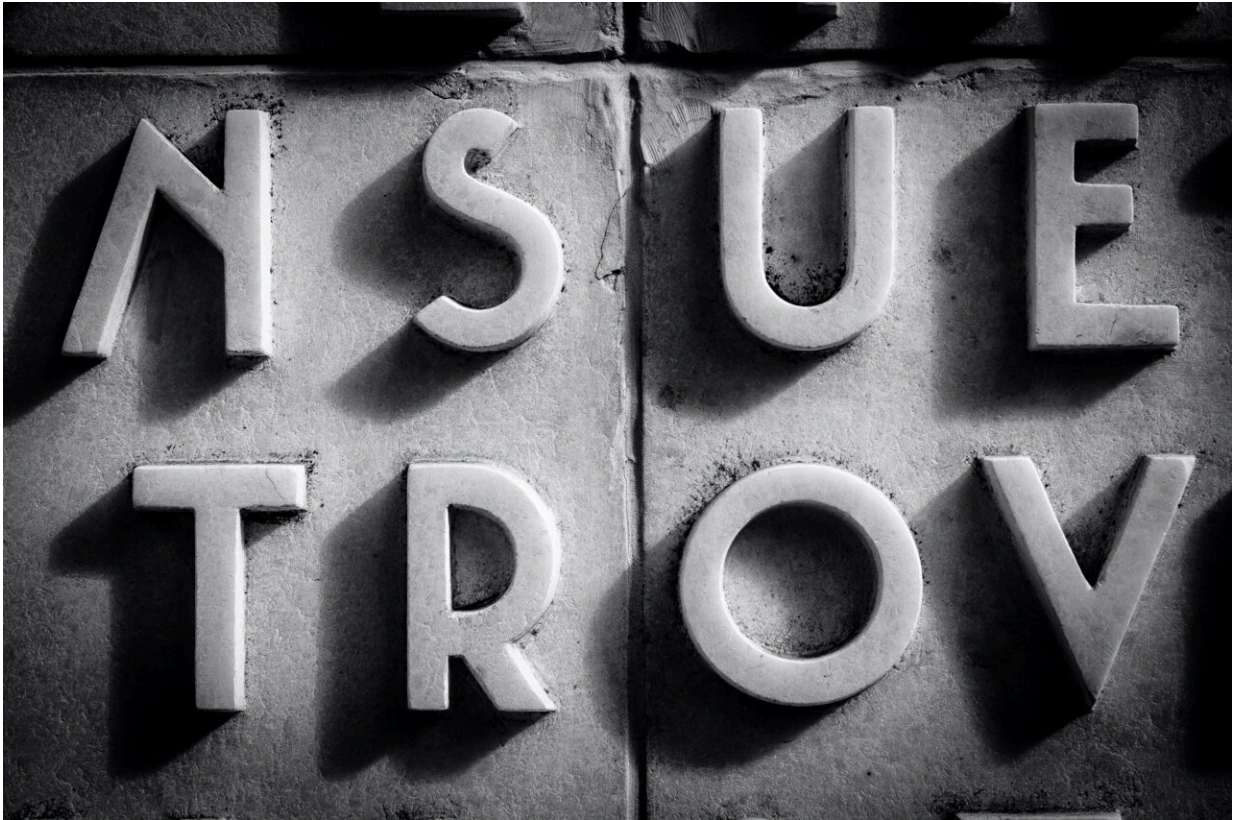


# What it takes to become a spelling bee champ

May 31 2023, by Pawan Dhingra

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Whenever the [Scripps National Spelling Bee](#) takes place, parents and children may wonder: What does it take to become a champion? Is it worth the effort?

As just about any former Scripps champion could tell you, the

contest—which is set to take place May 31 to June 1 this year—involves [a fair amount of luck](#), so preparation does not guarantee a victory.

There's simply no way a contestant can know which word awaits them from the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary. But if [young people find enjoyment](#) in learning how to spell words, as well as understanding the origins and meanings of these words, then they will feel proud of what they accomplished.

Still, as I state in my book "[Hyper Education: Why Good Schools, Good Grades, and Good Behavior Are Not Enough](#)," there are certain practices that can greatly boost a child's chances of becoming an excellent speller. I observed these practices among families who assist their children in competitive academics.

## 1. Invest in study materials

Rather than just open the dictionary, contestants study word lists, including the 4,000 words in the [free official study guide provided](#) by Scripps. Some parents create their own word lists based on observing past bees.

But to the extent possible, competitive spellers, including several [previous Scripps National Spelling Bee winners](#), have purchased special [word lists](#) to gain a competitive edge. These word lists, which may come in the form of computer software programs or printed booklets, are not easy for everyone to afford. The 2021 champion, Zaila Avant-garde, said her [family "had a little bit of trouble"](#) coming up with the money to purchase a popular online resource, which at the time cost \$600.

Beyond purchasing supplemental materials, hiring a coach has become [the new normal](#). These coaches, who are often former [spelling](#) bee contestants or teachers, [charge between \\$50 to over \\$200 an hour](#). Some coaches work with students one on one [on a weekly basis all year](#).

## 2. Practice independently

Students must commit to learning the word lists primarily through studying by themselves. Research shows that [deliberate practice](#)—that is, studying and memorizing words while alone—is a better predictor of performance in the national spelling bee than being quizzed by others or reading for pleasure. All of the students I met recounted studying in their rooms or at libraries or school. The daily ritual of studying also helps youths build up the stamina of spelling needed on the competitive stage.

## 3. Make studying a family affair

While studying alone is essential for adequate preparation, families should be prepared to accompany their contestant on this journey. I observed one mother and daughter who studied word lists at the kitchen table for three hours a day—every day—as they prepared for the competition.

Other families would make a game out of studying, with homemade placards and grown-ups playing the role of announcer. Another family would frequently watch "[Akeelah and the Bee](#)"—a movie about a young girl from Los Angeles who tries to make it to the national spelling bee—as a way to keep their daughter motivated.

A former champion shared that when her family went to an Italian restaurant, her father would use it as an occasion to practice words of Italian origin, such as chardonnay, rigatoni and spaghetti. The daughter would write the words on the paper menu, which she then brought home as a study guide and kept for years as memorabilia. All of these activities help the child know that they are not in this alone.

## 4. Form study groups

Another way young spellers make connections in this process is through online study groups. This can be done whether they are classmates in the same school or contestants living across the country. Youths can quiz one another, share strategies or make up study games. Having a sense of connection can deepen their [passion for learning](#) and further their motivation to stick with it.

The same camaraderie that children form in these study groups can be seen on stage during the Scripps National Spelling Bee itself. It's not uncommon for contestants to give each other high-fives after spelling a word correctly. There is less of an "us versus them" mentality that characterizes other competitive sports because students compete not against one another but against the dictionary.

## **5. Read a lot**

When I investigated why students got interested in spelling, just about all of them mentioned their love of reading. They also listed reading as their favorite hobby. Reading cannot substitute for deliberate practice, but it forms the foundation for why students fell in love with words in the first place.

Students benefit when they learn to become active readers. This involves looking up words they do not understand, paying attention to the use of words in sentences and, of course, focusing on their spelling.

With all this being said, it's important for families—and the contestants themselves—to pay attention to how they are feeling about the preparation. What parts do they enjoy the most? Is spelling practice taking up all their time to socialize or enjoy other interests and hobbies?

Burning out on a single competition isn't worth it if it undermines a

student's passion for learning. Families should pay attention to when it's time to tone down the studying and relax or let other interests rise to the surface. Parents of champions—and even champions themselves—routinely told me that their biggest benefit from the spelling bee was a heightened sense of responsibility and confidence. No trophy can match that.

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