Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom, and in today's episode I got to speak with Lyn Stone.

Lyn Stone is the author of three books, "Reading for Life," "Spelling for Life," and "Language for Life." She also offers many online courses, is an international speaker, and she's also an instructor. She spent many years teaching the kids who really, really struggle with reading, writing, and spelling. It was a true privilege and honor to be able to speak with her.

I actually saw her speak at The Reading League's event in October of 2023. I don't know if my American friends who are listening remember that day when we had the emergency broadcast system, the national thing, the first time we've ever had this happen everywhere, and everybody's phones were beeping like at the same time? That happened to be during her one-hour presentation that she flew across the world to give, because she lives in Australia, and she was a very good sport about that. It was a great presentation, and she was also a very good sport when we had some connection issues while recording this podcast.

I made my old mistake of not choosing the correct microphone, but Lyn is very clear and always articulate, so I know you'll get a lot out of this.

I just want to say upfront that Lyn has some different opinions than other people. There are definitely different ideas in the science of reading community, surrounding things like the idea of teaching blends and the idea of teaching syllable types. So I wanted to address those and let you hear from Lyn and hear her perspective.

In today's episode, we really work through how to teach English spelling, even though it's a complex system. I hope you enjoy it, and here we go!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Lyn!

Lyn Stone: Thank you!

Anna Geiger: I've read all your books and I've taken most of your courses, and just this past October I got to hear you speak in real life at The Reading League Conference in New York, and I even got a picture with you on the sidewalk. I'm really excited to be able to talk about spelling with you today, so thanks so much for coming on the podcast.

If you could start by introducing yourself and telling us about how you got into education?

Lyn Stone: Okay. So I'm a linguist, which means that I studied the structure of language at university. When I graduated I went over to Australia, so I studied in London at University College in London, and then I graduated and went over to Australia. I got a job at a Lindamood-Bell Clinic in Sydney, and I was trained in what they called the ADD program then, but it's now called LiPS.

The Lindamoods were one of the first people to actually talk about phonological awareness, and how important that was for literacy acquisition, so I did a lot of very in-depth phonological and phonemic awareness work with children and adults who were struggling to read and write.

I learned all of their stuff, and sort of moved up the ranks a little bit, but then they left Australia, and so I cast around for another job and found a job in a speech pathology clinic, and that's where I learned Spalding. That's one of those classic Orton-Gillingham programs. I learned that, and then did that day-in, day-out, combined with LiPS and so on, for a few years.

I kept finding gaps though in the programs, especially for children who were really struggling, so I started to write solutions to those gaps, and that became "Spelling for Life." Then it became "Language for Life," which is to do with grammar and syntax.

That's basically my history. It is a Tier 3-built career. I still have a practice, but now I have staff running that practice. What I do now is I consult to schools, so I fly around everywhere, and I work with systems rather than individuals, while my staff at home keeps the home fires burning and see individuals in small groups of struggling children and adults.

Anna Geiger: Interesting. So in your work with schools, what specific things are you doing?

Lyn Stone: So what schools will do is, they'll contact me and say, "We're starting or we are halfway through, or we're at this point on our science of reading, science of learning journey and we want to improve things, can you help us?"

What I do is I act as a critical friend, a thought partner. I'll train their staff, I'll do whatever it is that they need to take the next step towards a more research-informed approach to teaching literacy. It sends me all around the world. I'm very, very lucky and I'm very lucky to work with such dedicated schools as well. It gives me huge hope for the future of education.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, so how long have you been doing the consulting work?

Lyn Stone: On and off for quite a long time, over a decade, but I've now really focused on that. I do consulting, and I also run professional development, and from that professional development then there will be more consulting and so on. I've actually trained two other consultants, that's how big it's getting, and in 2024, they'll be on board as well doing consultancy work. So yeah, it's at least over a decade, but I've been running professional development though since, gosh, it's got to be since the late '90s.

Anna Geiger: Oh wow.

Lyn Stone: It's actually really scary.

Anna Geiger: That's great.

Lyn Stone: But there you go!

Anna Geiger: So spelling I know is one of your passions, and you have such a fun way of talking about spelling in your book. In the beginning you talk about spelling as being "much maligned and misunderstood." Can you explain why you wrote that?

Lyn Stone: Well, the English spelling system is complex. We know that, right? The migration patterns in England and Britain for the last 2000 years have been really complex. It has a lot of words and it has a lot of influence, and because of that, it's not a transparent system.

We've got 26 letters, and SO many words that we have to spell with those letters, that the system has grown to have complexity. Because of that, and because teachers are not really given the tools to teach that well from the beginning, then what happens is it gets this reputation for being somehow crazy, irregular, weird. And that's not true. It's actually a really, really elegant system, but it's a complex one.

With any alphabetic system, it's one that some human brains don't take to very well. Dyslexic people find it difficult to wrestle with print, and English is particularly difficult for them.

It gets maligned that way and it gets misunderstood, because it's not actually crazy at all. It just needs some really deep thought and good training to communicate about that. Even children and adults with dyslexia CAN get to certain pretty good levels of spelling if they get the right instruction.

Anna Geiger: And so I think you would say that understanding English spelling includes understanding different layers of language, maybe you would call it that? We've talked about things like orthography, morphology, and etymology. Can you talk about those things and how they relate to spelling?

Lyn Stone: Yeah, that's what makes it complex because it's not, "Here's the alphabet and this letter represents this sound. The end." That would be great if it were transparent like that, and there are lots of languages that are transparent like that.

What English has and what makes it complex, is that it has orthographic rules that drive it. For instance, things like that you don't use the letters CK at the beginning of a word. Some of the rules are really logical and easy to spot and easy to just understand by osmosis. Like with CK, we don't use that at the beginning of words, and people stopped doing that quite quickly, if they do it at all.

But there are things like CK at the end of words, where you don't precede that with a consonant, and you don't precede that with a vowel digraph typically. These are the orthographic rules that govern that system, and you have to have those rules because again, we have got so many words with a very small amount of letters, so we have to have ways of mixing them and marking what's pronounced and what's not pronounced and so on. So that's the orthographic layer and that makes it complex.

From that orthographic layer, there is the origin of the words. We make choices regarding what sequence of letters we have based on where the words came from. So it's not enough just to listen to the sounds of words, you've also got to know a little bit about the fact that there are stories of words.

So if you hear a /k/ at the end of a word, and it's a word derived from French, it's pretty likely that it's going to be QUE. So you've got etymological stuff going on there. If you see a PH in a word, it's pretty likely that this is a Greek base somewhere for a /f/.

Then there's the morphology as well. And actually all of it is inextricable, but morphological things are things like ... Well, it's not just about UN, and PRE, and the letter S, and the letters ED, and the letters ING. Morphology also works in tandem with spelling, and you have things that change up morphemic boundaries. You've got things like the word "act," but if you add the suffix ION, now you've got a pronunciation change to "action." It's not "act-tion," because that's actually inefficient to say.

So there's all of these layers that can be systematically taught, and they definitely can be integrated. It's always my goal to try and help teachers to do that effectively.

Anna Geiger: I think you call them exceptional words in your book, is that right? Words that we might consider irregular.

Lyn Stone: I don't really name them. What I do say... So there is a word stories wheel that we have in there, and within that wheel it says, "This word is exceptional because ..." That word isn't doing what you'd expect it to do, but there's always a reason why a letter sequence doesn't appear as you'd expect it, and that's a concept that's worth exploring.

So in "Spelling for Life," I talk about this, there are seven major reasons. However, a caveat, those are the stories and they're fun, but it's the practice that makes the difference. It's how you practice, and I know we are going to come up to a question about practice as well.

Sometimes we can get caught up in showcasing our amazing etymological knowledge and not planning for the practice. Spelling practice is really, really important.

So yes, definitely talk about the stories of words, but don't make that everything you do, because that's not the bit that they remember, or the bit that they have to remember. What they have to remember is that sequence. Tell them the "why" once.

It's a bit like comprehension strategies. You can tell them them how to do it a few times, but you've got to get down to actually wrestling with the thing, right?

Anna Geiger: Sure, sure.

This is not a question that I had submitted beforehand, but I would like to talk to you about your feeling about spelling rules, and what rules you feel are worth teaching and how you feel about that. Do you feel that students should be able to say the rule to apply it? There are just a lot of different opinions about that in the science of reading world.

Lyn Stone: Let's start with a broad view. Let's start with the overview, and the overview is this: spelling, English orthography, is a system, and that system is governed by rules. It has conventions. So whether you use the term "rules" or not, you're using them and you know them. If you have a lexicon, and you can instantly and effortlessly retrieve words for spelling, then you know the rules, whether you can say them or whether you can't say them, they exist and you know them.

That's our broad view. These things exist, these conventions. It's not a dirty free for all, right? That's the first thing about spelling.

Therefore you, as an adult with a complete lexicon, say if you're an educator and you've done it, you've achieved it, and you know how to spell, why would you keep that from people? Why would you keep it from them? Because not everyone is just going to learn this through exposure to print. Not everybody is going to learn this through osmosis, right? Why not tell them how it works? If you tell everyone how it works, you're going to bring everyone along with you. So of course, teach the rules.

Now, what does that actually mean? It doesn't mean I want a bunch of children in a classroom to be able to parrot stuff. That's saying the rules exist, but it doesn't say how to use them.

What I want is for children to have enough of a rationale around the system, and that includes irregularities, and it includes some technical terms like vowel, and consonant, and digraph, and final silent E, and so on. I want them to have enough of that to be able to make high quality decisions in my absence about letter sequences. That's what I want, and what that comes from is practice, good quality practice.

Anna Geiger: Well, as long as we're talking about practice, we'll move that question up. Can you talk to us about what good spelling practice looks like and doesn't look like?

Lyn Stone: Three things are important, I think, when you're practicing spelling. I'm a good speller, I'm lucky. I've got that sort of brain where I can look at a word and it's in basically, and that helped me build my lexicon really, really, really fast. I can't park my car straight and I don't count that well, but I can spell.

Okay, so what is it? I've questioned myself for many years. What is it that I do rather than just use my photographic memory? What is it that I do when I struggle with the word? How do I put the words I struggle with, even as a good speller, into my mind?

It is always using three things. Therefore, if you're going to practice, these three things even help terrific spellers.

The first one is that I need to analyze the structure of the word. I need to know why that sequence is that sequence. That helps me remember it when I look at why that is.

Secondly, I need to look at other words that belong in that family. So whatever it is that's bothering me about the sequence, if I put that with other words where they have kinships, I'm more likely to be able to retrieve that word.

Thirdly, I have a spelling voice. I have a spelling voice, and I use my spelling voice. So I will say "s-cissors." I will say "Wed-nes-day." I will say "O-N-E, one."

My spelling voice varies depending on what I'm trying to remember. Sometimes I'll say the letter names, sometimes I'll over-pronounce everything. I'll make sure I don't use schwa, because that's not my spelling voice.

So those three things, spelling voice, structure, families, that helps good spellers remember also help struggling spellers remember.

Anna Geiger: What are some things that people should NOT do?

Lyn Stone: Well, I wrote a whole thing on that in a peer-reviewed journal about spelling activities from toxic to useful, with a big area in the middle called useless.

So if we go right down to toxic, basically I call them toxic because they'll make you a worse speller. They'll impede your progress while you are trying to build your lexicon. It's things like activities involving staring at the words. It's incredibly passive, a waste of your time, and it just doesn't work.

Mixing up the order of letters, that's insane! It's the sequence, you've got to remember the sequence. If you're focusing on something that's out of sequence, well, as Anita Archer says, "Practice makes permanent," not perfect, but permanent. So you better practice that sequence as it is, not as it's not. Those are things like jumble up the letters and focusing on the visual aspects of words. It's not your visual memory that's helping you retrieve those words from long-term memory. It's different structures there.

So we're really off the path sometimes when we do activities that involve staring at words, or drawing lines around them and around their shape. I call them "word coffins." Just again, focusing on the visual features. That's not how we remember words.

So today might be the day you don't do that, if you do that.

Anna Geiger: So you have some opinions on certain things that are maybe common practice in some programs. Maybe you could speak to your feelings about teaching blends. People call them sometimes consonant clusters, but it's groups of consonants that come together in words where each has its own sound. Can you speak to your feelings about that?

Lyn Stone: Well, what they are is lifeless zombies, because if you teach consonant clusters as one unit, you're neither teaching a grapheme nor a phoneme, nor a morpheme. You're not teaching any of these things that are actually the units of language.

If you're teaching these consonant clusters, and I don't want to even call them blends, because the act of blending is really, really useful for learning to read. The act of blending graphemes and phonemes together to form words is really useful. But a blend, like in the word "blend," that starts with a B and an L, and it ends with an N and a D, so it's plenty of bookends of blends.

If you teach those as units, firstly, you've got to then cover hundreds of linguistic units that children now have to somehow memorize.There's no hook to hang these things on there. There's no morphemes there. There are two phonemes, there are two graphemes. It's a lot to remember, and you will overwhelm a lot of children.

Secondly, if you teach blends and then you get children to (and I see this ALL the time) write a word like say the word "blend," and you're telling them to sound it out. A lot of children will write the B and they'll go "b-end," and they'll write "bend," because there's too much information in that tiny unit of time.

I see this all the time, missing persons, I call them. Disappearing consonants from these clusters, because they don't have sufficient knowledge and time to sound all that out properly. So linguistically, it doesn't make sense to do that.

What DOES make sense is that actually L and R are two of the letters that occupy that secondary position most, and that's because of their pronunciation. It's a good idea to tell children that, that's a great idea! And the letter S goes with lots of things, again, because when we say it, we can then move to lots of different consonant places. That's a little bit more, I think, linguistically accurate and interesting and usable, instead of teaching these zombies that are neither graphemes, phonemes, nor morphemes.

Anna Geiger: When I first heard people like you talk about not teaching blends, as they're often called, I misunderstood that, I think, at first, because you're not saying not to teach kids to read CCVCC words, you're just emphasizing that those two letters should not be taught as an individual unit. I think that might be confusing some people.

Do you have any specific suggestions for teaching kids to not make that mistake, as you were saying, of dropping the second letter of the blend?

Lyn Stone: Yeah, look, consonant clusters are difficult, so once you've mastered your CVC, you can start bringing in consonant clusters for sure.

I have an exercise that I do with kids in "Spelling for Life," that's called a consonant start card and a consonant end card. What they do is, over time, they will almost like an inquiry, dare I say it, an inquiry-based project where they get all the consonants, and they go, "Okay, what goes with what?" That analysis is really helpful as well, because they form the conclusion that it's L and R. They can both go with lots of things! That's an approach that's a lot more helpful than saying learn these pieces of code.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Lyn Stone: Yeah, it just makes a lot more sense, I think, to turn them into linguists rather than just giving them more stuff to memorize with no rationale.

Anna Geiger: Sure.

Can you speak to your opinion about syllable types?

Lyn Stone: Yeah. Again, we're in zombie territory again. We're in zombie territory when we talk about syllable types. Most words in English are polysyllabic, right? And of those polysyllabic words, they will consist of a base and some affixes. That's really what makes the polysyllabic words into the polysyllabic words.

There are some exceptions, of course, but let's talk about the majority, because again, like we said at the beginning, when you need to acquire 30,000 to 70,000 words so that you can go on and have an academic career, you can go to university or whatever, then you can't teach it word by word. You've got to teach good examples.

The good examples are the polysyllabic words that consists of bases and affixes, because that's the majority of the words!

Syllable types are neither; they're not bases or affixes, they're just an overanalysis. They're lifeless zombies again, they don't connect to any meaning. They're very difficult to generalize, and they're mostly not true as well. They don't really form typical patterns. Even open and closed syllable only works about 60% of the time.

When you get into polysyllabic territory, you've got this thing that we do in English called stress. We're a stress-timed language. We have vowel reduction, so you're going to schwa lots of those syllables as well. It's better to have the stable morphemes understood and learned than the so-called syllable type that tells you nothing except maybe how to pronounce a word that may be fairly reliable.

This language is not about pronunciation. That's part of it, but to be able to make robust mental orthographic images of words so that you can retrieve them effortlessly, so that you can then be automatic in your writing, so that you can be strategic in your writing, you're going to have to understand the morphemes and be able to use them well.

Syllable types are not bad. Again, it's just inefficient.

Anna Geiger: I know the schwa intrudes a lot, which does make it very difficult when using syllable types to pronounce syllables.

I know you talked about how you have used your spelling voice to help kids spell words, so if they're spelling the word "cactus," their spelling voice would be "cac-tus." Do you have any other tips for teaching spelling with schwa? Because that does get so tricky.

Lyn Stone: Yeah, the first thing is to understand what schwa is as an educator. It's not something that you necessarily have to make children be able to do, to write that upside down e properly. That's a little bit too much overkill.

But as an educator, if you think about it, what we have is speech, and then we've got writing, and they're two different beasts.

Now in speech, what we do is we reduce vowels. We do that so that we don't sound robotic, right? English is a stress-timed language, so it tries to keep regular intervals between strong syllables in words. That's what makes English sound like English. To do that, we reduce the quality of the vowels in polysyllabic words. Even in our speech, like even the word "was," when you say it in isolation, it's "was" (pronounced slowly and fully), but in speech, a lot of the time it's just "was" (pronounced quickly and using a very quick schwa sound) right? You're reducing that battle.

That's what we do in a stress-timed language, so that makes it hard to spell. If the only tool in your toolbox is sound it out, it makes it hard to spell because as soon as schwa comes along, all hell breaks loose because there is no schwa vowel in spelling it's A, E, I, O, or U. So that's the problem, right?

The solution is spelling voice and understanding morphemes as well. Morphemes are spelled stably. They are stable, whether it's /r/-/ē/ or /r/-/ŭ/, like "respond," it's always spelled R-E.

They're really nice and stable, and they obey the rules as well. You have suffixing conventions and you have assimilated prefixes. Knowing that and teaching that, no matter how you say the words, will help you spell the words.

Anna Geiger: For teachers who might want to know more about that, because I've seen presentations you've given, like the one I saw in person, and then the ones I see online, and you talk about using the morphemes to help with the spelling.

So much of the time, I think, well, I don't know all those morphemes yet because I know it goes on forever and ever. For teachers who want to get started, and feel like their knowledge of morphemes is small, is there a particular reference or lesson plans or things that can help them get started there?

Lyn Stone: Well, luckily we are not under-resourced when it comes to morphological stuff. We're not under-resourced at all. I have a morphology masterclass for beginners. William Van Cleave does some starling work on this stuff.

You've also got these groups, structured word inquiry groups, on social media that meet and are incredibly generous with their time and understanding. There are lots and lots of places to go.

I think structured word inquiry is a really good starting point for lots and lots of people, because it helps you dip your toe in. Just start with a word, any word, and you start to become addicted to morphology at some point from that starting point. I would definitely point people in that direction.

There's also a book that I absolutely love, two of them. One's called "Backpocket Words" by Gail Venable. It's wonderful. That's all about conversations about ... She selected a bunch of words and said, "Have them in your back pocket," because that's going to help you to become more morphologically aware, and therefore more morphologically proficient so that you can teach that to students. So "Backpocket Words" is a brilliant book.

Then there's "Beneath the Surface of Words." I love that book by Sue Hegland. It teaches me so much. Those are both really good places to start.

Anna Geiger: I'm reading "Beneath the Surface of Words" right now, and the other one is next on my list, and it's really fun. I do love words, but there are so many things in there I've never considered! The one that struck me the most was the root CAV and then how that goes into "cavity." I just never connected "cavern" and "cavity" before. That was fascinating to me.

Lyn Stone: Right, and concave!

Anna Geiger: It's super interesting.

Lyn Stone: It just reveals so many things, and things that you have never thought about.

I think also what it does, and this is a message I really want to get out to teachers if they're considering moving to more morphologically, etymologically, and orthographically-based approaches. Is that it's an absolute no-shame zone. You don't have to carry all of this information around in your head.\

However you start, and wherever you have a go, that's better than not doing it. You will be accepted into a really wide community of people who are nonjudgmental about all of this. I made a ton of mistakes with morphology in my time. It's something we all do, but I'm not ashamed. I am just glad I was there and did it.

I'd love to spread that message as well, because kids dig it, and they remember it, and the benefits of it are so far-reaching. Why wouldn't you? So the message is don't be afraid to do this.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and like you said, once you start to learn it, you start to see how much spelling has to do with morphology in so many ways because the pronunciation changes, but we can see that morpheme is there.

I will be sure to share some resources in the show notes, including your Morphology Masterclass, which is the one I haven't taken yet, but that is on my list. Anything else you'd like to share? Resources that you have or projects you're working on that you'd like people to know about?

Lyn Stone: Well, 2024 is the Chinese year of the dragon, and I've always used dragons in my resources. I've always had little pictures of dragons, and you've got the decoding dragon that you can download on Teachers Pay Teachers.

I've sort of formalized the approach to word study that we use at Lifelong Literacy called the 4-Step Process. One of the things that I've done that we'll be releasing in 2024, is that all of the pictures to do with what you do at every step of the 4-Step Process to study words is a dragon! That's going to be formally released next year as a 4-Step Process kit, and we'll be updating the 4-Step Process resources. Yeah, so 2024 really is the year of word study via the 4-Step Process, and all the dragons. That's what's coming.

Anna Geiger: Okay, that sounds exciting. Great. I can't wait. I've seen that. I think you shared that 4-Step Process in that workshop that I saw in New York.

Well, thank you so much. I'm going to have fun finding things to share in the show notes, because there are so many resources you've shared online and all kinds of things. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to come talk to us.

Lyn Stone: Always a huge pleasure. Love your work!

Anna Geiger: Thank you.

Lyn Stone: Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at themeasuredmom.com/episode154. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R teaching.