EDUCATION

Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795582521640387

Introduction: Unlocking the Power of Word Study with the Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide

For decades, educators have sought effective methods to teach spelling and phonics in a way that truly meets each student's developmental needs. The traditional weekly spelling list, while simple to administer, often fails to address the diverse range of spelling abilities found in any elementary classroom. This is where the **Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide** becomes an indispensable tool. Rooted in developmental spelling theory, this resource helps teachers diagnose exactly what students know about the English written language system, moving beyond simple rote memorization toward genuine word knowledge.

In this comprehensive guide, we will explore every facet of the Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide. You will learn what it is, how it works, how to score it, and—most importantly—how to use the results to drive instruction. Whether you are a new teacher looking for a structured approach to word study or a seasoned veteran seeking to refine your practice, this article will provide the clarity and depth you need to implement this powerful assessment with confidence.

What Is the Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory?

The Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory (often abbreviated as ESI) is a qualitative spelling assessment designed to reveal a student's stage of spelling development. It is part of the broader Words Their Way program created by Donald Bear, Marcia Invernizzi, Shane Templeton, and Francine Johnston. Unlike conventional spelling tests that simply mark words right or wrong, this inventory focuses on the **features** within each word—specific patterns, letter-sound correspondences, and orthographic conventions that students apply as they spell.

The **Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide** is the scoring and analysis tool that accompanies the inventory. It breaks down each spelling word into its constituent features (e.g., beginning consonants, digraphs, short vowels, blends, vowel patterns, inflected endings) and provides a systematic way to track which features a student has mastered, which are emerging, and which are absent. This feature-level analysis is what makes the inventory so powerful for differentiating instruction.

Why Use the Feature Guide? The Benefits of Developmental Spelling Assessment

Traditional spelling tests often produce a single score that tells you little about what a child actually understands. A student might spell "ship" correctly because they memorized it, but struggle to spell "shop"

Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide reveals this nuance. Here are the main benefits:

- Pinpoints specific strengths and weaknesses: By examining each feature, you can see exactly which orthographic patterns a student controls.
- Guides targeted instruction: Instead of teaching random spelling lists, you can group students by feature needs and focus on the patterns they are ready to learn.
- Supports differentiation: The feature guide makes it easy to form flexible small groups within your classroom.
- Provides a baseline and tracks growth: Administer the inventory three times a year (fall, winter, spring) to document progress and adjust instruction.
- Aligned with the science of reading: Developmental spelling assessments are research-based and grounded in how children acquire orthographic knowledge.

How the Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide Works

The inventory typically includes 25 words that sample spelling features from the primary through intermediate stages. The exact words can be found in the Words Their Way core manual, but the feature guide itself is a grid. For each word, the guide lists the features being assessed. For example, the word “bed” might assess beginning consonant “b”, short vowel “e”, and ending consonant “d”. The word “stick” might assess the “st” blend and the “ck” digraph.

When scoring, the teacher records whether the student spelled each feature correctly. A feature is considered correct if the student uses the correct letter(s) for that part of the word, even if other parts are wrong. For instance, if a student spells “bed” as “bad”, the beginning consonant “b” is correct, the short vowel “e” is wrong (since they used “a”), and the ending consonant “d” is correct. This nuanced scoring is precisely what the feature guide facilitates.

Understanding Feature Categories

The feature guide typically organizes features into categories that align with developmental spelling stages:

1. Alphabetic Stage Features: Beginning and ending consonants, consonant digraphs (sh, ch, th, wh), short vowels, consonant blends (st, tr, bl).
2. Within-Word Pattern Stage Features: Long vowel patterns (CVCe, CVVC, etc.), r-controlled vowels, other vowel digraphs (oo, ou, ow).
3. Syllables and Affixes Stage Features: Inflected endings (-ed, -ing, -s, -es), plurals, verb tenses, homophones, contractions.
4. Derivational Relations Stage Features: Prefixes and suffixes, Greek and Latin roots, assimilated prefixes, spelling-meaning connections.

By analyzing which features a student consistently spells correctly, you can place them in the appropriate developmental stage and tailor your word study activities accordingly.

Step-by-Step Guide to Administering the Inventory

To get the most accurate results, follow these steps when using the **Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide**:

1. Prepare the Materials

You will need the list of 25 inventory words, a blank feature guide for each student (often available in the Words Their Way companion website or teacher resource books), and a quiet environment. Ensure each student has a numbered answer sheet (or a piece of paper numbered 1–25).

2. Explain the Purpose to Students

Let students know this is not a graded test but a way for you to understand how they spell so you can help them learn better. Encourage them to do their best, but do not provide any hints or corrections.

3. Say Each Word Clearly

Read each word aloud, say it in a short sentence to provide context, and then repeat the word. For example: “Number one: bed. I sleep in my bed. Bed.” Give students enough time to write their spelling, but do not wait excessively for students who struggle—move on to maintain test integrity.

4. Collect the Papers

After all 25 words have been dictated, collect the papers. Do not mark them with a traditional right/wrong score yet. Instead, you will use the feature guide to analyze each spelling.

How to Score Using the Feature Guide

Scoring with the **Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide** is where the real diagnostic power lies. Here is the process:

- Open a feature guide sheet for each student. The guide has rows for each word and columns for each feature.
- Examine the student’s spelling for word 1. Compare it to the correct spelling listed in the feature guide.
- For each feature column (e.g., beginning consonant, short vowel, ending consonant), decide if the student’s attempt matches the expected feature. If yes, put a checkmark or “1” in that cell. If no, leave it blank or mark “0”.
- Move to the next word and repeat. Some words may have more than three features, such as blends or digraphs.
- After all words are scored, count the total number of correct features for each column. This gives a raw score per feature category.
- Then, count the total number of correct features across all words to get an overall feature score.

Interpreting the Scores

The total feature score helps determine the student’s developmental stage. The Words Their Way manual provides specific score ranges for each stage. For example, a score of 0–20 may indicate the Emergent stage, 21–40 the Letter Name–Alphabetic stage, 41–60 the Within-Word Pattern stage, and so on. However, it is the pattern across feature columns that is most instructive. If a student consistently misses short vowels but gets all consonants correct, your instruction should focus on short vowel patterns.

Using the Feature Guide to Form Instructional Groups

One of the most practical uses of the **Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide** is to create differentiated small groups for word study. Here’s a typical classroom application:

Step 1: Compile Student Data

After scoring all students, list each student’s overall stage and the specific features they need to work on. You might use a color-coding system: green for mastered, yellow for developing, red for not yet demonstrated.

Step 2: Form Groups of 4–6 Students

Group students who share similar feature needs. For example, all students who need work on short vowels and blends can form one group, while those ready for vowel teams form another. Avoid grouping solely by overall stage; feature-specific grouping is more precise.

Step 3: Plan Word Study Activities

For each group, select word sorts, games, and practice activities targeting the features identified by the guide. For example, for a group working on CVCe patterns, use word sorts like “cap” vs. “cape”. For a group mastering digraphs, create picture sorts with “ship,” “chip,” and “thin”.

Common Mistakes to Avoid When Using the Feature Guide

Even experienced teachers can misinterpret the feature guide. Here are pitfalls to watch for:

- Relying only on the total score. The total is helpful, but the feature-by-feature breakdown is what drives instruction.
- Counting a word wrong if one part is misspelled. Remember: each feature is scored independently. A partially correct spelling provides valuable information.
- Administering too infrequently. Children progress quickly; reassess at least three times per year to keep groups accurate.
- Using the inventory as a graded test. It is a diagnostic, not an evaluative measure. Do not assign a letter grade.
- Ignoring spelling errors that are not on the feature guide. The guide focuses on predetermined features, but note any other interesting errors—they may indicate deeper issues.

Integrating the Feature Guide with Classroom Instruction

The **Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide** is not meant to sit in a filing cabinet. It should directly inform your daily word study block. Here are some integration ideas:

Word Sort Routines

After forming groups, provide each group with a set of words (or picture cards for younger students) that contrast the features they need to learn. For example, for a group working on short a vs. short i, give them words like “cat,” “cap,” “kit,” “pit.” Students sort them into columns under the correct vowel sound. This hands-on activity builds pattern recognition.

Writing and Reading Connections

Use feature-specific words in writing prompts and guided reading. If a student struggles with r-controlled vowels, provide decodable texts that heavily feature “ar,” “er,” “ir,” “or,” “ur” words. Encourage them to find and highlight these patterns.

Individualized Spelling Contracts

For older students, use the feature guide results to create individualized spelling lists. A student who has mastered short vowels but needs to work on vowel teams can practice 10–12 words with vowel digraphs during the week, rather than a generic list.

Conclusion: Making the Most of the Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide

The **Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide** is far more than a scoring sheet—it is a roadmap to effective, data-driven word study. By breaking down spelling into discrete features and tracking each student’s control over those features, you move away from one-size-fits-all spelling instruction and toward a truly differentiated classroom. The guide reveals not just what words a child can spell, but how they think about spelling. This insight empowers you to teach each child exactly what they need next, at the right developmental moment.

Implementing the feature guide does require an upfront

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