

# Learn Unifon—Spell the Sounds!

By Kenneth C. Anderson

Are you tired of feeling stupid because you spell words wrong all the time?

Me, too. But I'm doing something about it.

English is an easy language to speak—nearly everybody in the world speaks English these days. But it's a hard language to read and write, and the spelling is what makes it so hard.

Here's why we feel stupid. We have a language that uses 40 sounds, but we only have 26 letters to spell them. That doesn't even qualify as an alphabet, by definition. It's our alphabet that's stupid, not us. Children struggle for years trying to master our own language, while other countries teach their children to read in three months, and some of them don't need to study spelling in school.

I'm tired of being put down when I have to ask how to spell a word—and I'm a pretty good speller. I'm also tired of people asking me how to spell something—especially when I'm not sure of the spelling myself. My wife is a poor speller. Not long ago she asked me how to spell the liver disease that sounds like “su-row'-sis.” I wasn't sure, so I tried to look it up. I couldn't find it any of our four dictionaries under words that start with “ps” or “sc,” much less “s.”

Finally I consulted a software program I wrote that converts standard spelling to Unifon and back, and I was able to find the word. C-I-R-R-H-O-S-I-S. In Unifon, the word is spelled **SIRQIS**. That's pretty close to the “sounds like” spelling I used above. More important, when I looked it up in my database according to the way it sounds, I was able to find the standard spelling.

Unifon is a 40-character phonemic alphabet that was used in several pilot programs to accelerate the process of children learning to read and write. Actually, they simply learned to write the sounds they speak. We speak 40 sounds in English. Unifon has a letter for each of them. Every letter represents only one sound, so there is no confusion. One letter, one sound—that is the meaning of the name Unifon.

What makes Unifon work? Children learn to write the sounds they speak. Other children read the sound-signs their classmates have written. Step by step, it takes from a week to a month for them to grasp all the sounds and how to combine them into words. After that, the children can read and write any word they know. By some estimates, a child entering first grade currently speaks up to 12,000 words. With Unifon, a child can write any of those words and spell them according to how they sound.

Let's try some familiar words and compare standard spelling to Unifon spelling.

If you see the word **KAT**, do you know what it means? Of course you recognize that word; it's the way "cat" *should* be spelled. Guess what? In Unifon, that's exactly the way you spell cat—just the way it sounds and just the way it *should* be spelled..

Look at the word "cell". There's a "C" that has a different sound—the "S" sound that threw me in *cirrhosis*. And how about those two "L's" at the end of the word cell—why do we need two letters there? We really only need one, so why not spell it that way? If you saw the word CEL, could you guess what it meant? How about **SEL**, the way to spell it in Unifon? Doesn't that make better sense? It takes three sounds to say that word, and we have three letters, one for each of the sounds. Simple.

Now let's use only the six Unifon letters we have learned so far and see if we can spell some other words that you will recognize. **TEL, LES, SAT, LAK, TAK, SAK, LET, SET, AT, ELS, AKS, AKT**. How many of them did you get? If you learned the sound for each of the letters, you would immediately recognize them as tell, less, sat, lack, tack, sack, let, set, at, else, ax and act. Those words are limited to only six sounds, one for each of the six letters you already know. Yes, some of the words are spelled differently from their standard spelling—but you spell them in Unifon the way they would be spelled if our alphabet worked like alphabets are supposed to work.

As you see, if you follow the simplest rules, you can learn to read Unifon English in a very short period of time. Most adults who already read learn Unifon in two hours or less. When you can read in Unifon, you can write in Unifon. And if you can write *something* in Unifon, you can write *everything* in Unifon.

Consider the word **ELS** given above. I'll bet your first guess was to say it with a "Z" sound at the end and then think to yourself, "Is that a word?" But that "S" letter only ever stands for one sound—"S". If you need the "Z" sound, like in cells or bells, guess what you use in Unifon. Right, a "Z." And there are no double letters in Unifon. So in Unifon you would spell **SELZ** and **BELZ**.

Now that you are familiar with all the spelling rules—seriously, you know all TWO of them—you can start learning the sounds of all the letters and practice writing and reading in Unifon.

- **Spell each word using one letter for each sound.**
- **Do not double any letter.**

Be honest. You often spell words like they should sound—or at least you get as close as our 26 letters allow. Internet shortcut spelling is your creative way to write because it's faster and it takes less time and space. And there is a whole sub-culture built around creative spelling on the Internet chat circuit.

You see "wun" and you know it's either "one" or "won." And you know which it is by how it's used in the sentence. Unifon spells both those words **WUN** because that's the way they sound. But you know the meaning by how it's used: **HE WUN ĤAT WUN**.

Did you understand that? There are two strange looking letters we have not learned yet. But look again—they might be close enough to something you already know that you could guess what the sentence is. See if you got it right: it’s “He won that one.” The first new letter represents the long “E” sound, like beet (**BĚT**) or seat (**SĚT**). The second new letter represents the voiced “th” sound as in then (**ḥEN**) or this (**ḥIS**).

Okay, you’ve got the idea. Now look at the rest of the Unifon alphabet—first the letters you already know, along with a sample word. In each case, the sample word is spelled the same in Unifon as it is in standard English. You, or a child learning to read, can find many words you already know.

A	AT
B	BAT
D	DAN
E	END
F	FAN
G	GET
H	HOT
I	BIN
J	JOG
K	KIN
L	LAG
M	MOB
N	NOT
O	BOND
P	POND
R	RAN
S	SAT
T	TAN
U	SUN
V	VAN
W	WIN
Y	YET
Z	ZIP

Each letter represents the most frequent sound you use for that letter. You will find many familiar words in Unifon like those shown above. But now it’s time to introduce you to the new letters that represent secondary sounds, or those used less often.

Start with the vowel sounds They can best be learned in groups.

In the A group are three letters—one is familiar, two are new.

A	AT	Δ	ATE (ΔT)	Λ	BALL (BAL)
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You know two of the three letters in the E group. The third is new.

E END I BEET (BIT) R FERN (FRN)

The I group has two letters—you already know how one is used.

I BIN ± TIE (T±)

The largest group, O, has five letters. You have seen only one of them.

O BOND O BONE (BON) Ø BOOK (BØK)  
O BOW (BØ) O BOY (BØ)

The U group has three letters, two of them new to you.

U SUN U SOON (SUN) U FEUD (FUD)

You may have thought it would be too hard to learn all these new letters, but when you realize you can group all of them into five familiar categories it's not too far out, is it? You have just become familiar with 11 new letters, each with its own unique sound, yet all of them resemble something familiar to you. The A group all have the same tent shape. Es all have three horizontal lines. I's have two horizontal lines, Os are all round, U's are all curved at the bottom. 16 vowels in five familiar shapes.

There remain six unique consonant sounds that require special letters to represent them. Even these have something familiar to help you remember the sounds they represent.

Ç CHIN (ÇIN) Š SHIN (ŠIN) Σ MEASURE (MESΣR)  
Ń SING (SINŃ) Ħ THEN (ĦEN) Ħ THIN (ĦIN)

There you have it—40 letters, one for each of the 40 sounds we use when we talk. 23 of them are familiar to you already. Learn all 40 and you can write (or read) any word you can speak. Just write the sounds.

Compare it to numbers. With 10 numbers—0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9—we can write and read any number. In the same way, with these 40 letters we can represent every word we speak in English. Just combine the letters in the same order you say them. WITHOUT SPELLING LESSONS!

Now you are ready to have some fun with Unifon.  
NØ U OR REDI TŮ HAV SUM FUN WIĦ UNIFON.

At the official Unifon web site you can download four fonts here:

<http://www.unifon.org/unifon%20characters.htm>

Then download a keyboard layout chart that you can display near your computer, and start typing in Unifon. You can do that here:

<http://www.unifon.org/UFEdRes/Unifon%20keyboard.pdf>

Yahoo! Instant Messenger (IM) and Windows IM both let you use any font in your font folder. If you have the Unifon fonts installed, you can communicate with other Unifon users and read what they have written in Unifon. And both Yahoo! and Windows allow you to share friends on the other IM.

If you have a child who is ready to learn how to read, teach Unifon and practice writing and reading in Unifon for a short time. As soon as (s)he discovers that (s)he can read words written with upper case letters—like the Sunday comics, road signs, TV messages or billboards—abandon Unifon until they have learned to read and write in standard English, because standard spelling still represents the “real world.” Your child will always be able to read Unifon, and one day (s)he will return to it.

In the future the whole world will read and write English using the Unifon alphabet. It makes too much sense not to do that. So you may as well get started now.

Did I say you would learn to spell better? I did not. In fact, you will probably always continue to spell words the way you think they sound after you graduate from high school or college. Your spelling will probably not be correct until we all switch to Unifon. But you will be able to communicate in English, you will be able to write every word you can speak, and you will be able to read any word your friends write in Unifon.

If you can write every word you know, you have mastered a task greater than half of the population of the United States can manage today.