

# Spelling Bee: A 100-Year-Old Tradition [A2]

Quando non esistevano i correttori ortografici digitali la gente doveva basarsi sulla propria memoria per scrivere correttamente i vocaboli. Adesso gli alunni delle scuole degli Stati Uniti vengono incoraggiati con grossi premi a competere nelle 'spelling bees'.



A spelling bee is a difficult spelling competition in which participants of school age have to spell a series of words, letter by letter. If a contestant misspells a word, they are immediately eliminated. Spelling bees originated in the United States around a hundred years ago and today take place in almost all elementary and middle schools in the country. While classroom and school spelling bees take place regularly, there are also local and state competitions. The best spellers compete at national level at a high-profile annual event called the Scripps National Spelling Bee. The final round is broadcast live, and the overall winner awarded \52,500 in [cash] (## "cash") plus \400 worth of the Encyclopedia Britannica. **WHAT'S IN ITS NAME?** The word 'bee' is not a reference to buzzing insect, but derived from an Old English word meaning a 'prayer' or a favour. By the 18th century, it had come to describe any gathering of people who unite their efforts to accomplish a task. 'Bee' is usually preceded by another word that defines

their **purpose**: for example, an ‘apple bee’ is when farmers get together to **harvest** apples, or a ‘**quilt**ing bee’ is when a group of people gather to make a **quilt**. The expression ‘**spelling** bee’ means a group of people who **assemble** to spell words — **albeit** in competition with each other. **ENGLISH SPELLING** Spelling English words can be **tricky**, even for native speakers. There are forty-four sounds or ‘phonemes’ in the English language, but only twenty-six letters in its alphabet. English **borrow**s many words from other languages, and has **developed** in a number of different countries around the world at different periods of time. As a result, the relationship between some words’ **spelling** and their pronunciation can be unpredictable. Perhaps given the country’s history as a **melting pot** **fusing** many nationalities, **spelling** bees are extremely popular in the US. **THE FIRST COMPETITION** The National Spelling Bee was celebrated in 1925 as a consolidation of numerous local **spelling** bees. It was organised by a **newspaper** called the Courier-Journal based in Louisville, Kentucky. The winner was eleven-year-old Frank Neuhauser who, with his correct **spelling** of the final word ‘gladiolus’ (a kind of plant), won \$500 in gold, a bicycle and a trip to the White House to meet US President Calvin Coolidge. **WINNING WORDS** Some of the **toughest** winning words correctly spelt in Scripps National Spelling Bees in the past are: “albumen” (another word for **egg whites**); “chiaroscurist” (a painter who uses light and **shade rather than** colour to create the illusion of volume); “autochthonous” (referring to a person indigenous to a place); “staphylococci” (a bacterium that causes pus to form); and “foulard” (a **lightweight fabric** made of **silk** or a mix of **silk** and **cotton**).

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# Glossary

- **melting pot** = crogiuolo, miscuglio
- **misspells** = sbagliare l'ortografia
- **overall** = assoluto
- **gathering** = riunione
- **accomplish a task** = realizzare un compito
- **purpose** = scopo
- **assemble** = riunirsi
- **toughest** = più difficili
- **rather than** = anziché
- **cash** = cash
- **'prayer'** = preghiera
- **harvest** = raccogliere
- **fabric** = tessuto
- **worth** = dal valore di 400 dollari
- **tricky** = complicato
- **high-profile** = di grande risonanza
- **quilt** = coperta
- **albeit** = sebbene
- **developed** = sviluppare
- **cotton** = cotone
- **awarded** = premiare
- **efforts** = sforzi
- **fusing** = fondere
- **egg whites** = albumi
- **silk** = seta
- **shade** = ombra
- **lightweight** = leggerissimo
- **spelling** = fare lo spelling, compitare
- **broadcast** = emettere
- **buzzing** = ronzare
- **borrows** = prendere in prestito
- **newspaper** = giornale