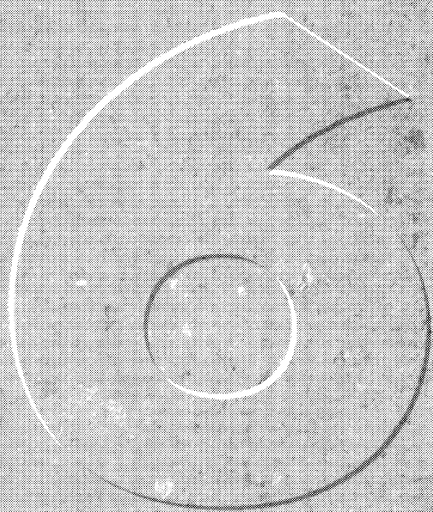




**Nicholas  
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**How to decide on  
a spelling system**



## How to decide on a spelling system



In other parts of this book we have seen that untrained people recording Australian languages often made mistakes because they tried to use the spelling system of their own language. Each language has its own system of sounds, and it is by finding out what those sounds are and how they work in the language that we can then develop a good spelling system. Ideally a spelling system should aim to show what the meaningful sounds of a language are.

## Can't we use the English system?



English has a spelling system that got stuck a few hundred years ago and has not been able to keep up with changes in the language. It has also had words from other languages coming in at various times and on top of all of that, scholars changed the spelling system to try and show the origins of words, so we got stuck with a *b* in debt, *p* in receipt and *h* in honour. The spelling we use in English does its best and really does very well, but it also has lots of ways of spelling the same sounds. Think about words like these in which the bolded parts are all the same sounds:

|     |       |      |      |        |     |   |
|-----|-------|------|------|--------|-----|---|
| eye | aye   | why  | sigh | pi     | pie | l |
| cow | bough |      |      |        |     |   |
| kit | women |      |      |        |     |   |
| sew | hoe   | crow | pro  | though |     |   |

Now think of examples which use the same spelling, but are pronounced differently:

|       |       |         |
|-------|-------|---------|
| bough | cough | through |
| how   | tow   |         |

The problem of trying to write an Australian indigenous language using an English spelling system has been the topic of other parts of this book. When we come to design a spelling system for a language that has not been written before, we can make it much more sensible than the English one.

We should try to make the spelling system so that one sound in the language has one letter. All spelling systems which linguists help develop should follow this approach, each sound having one symbol. There are good spelling systems in use all over Australia, used in schools, in major reference works like dictionaries and in other books. The chart on pages 112–113 shows some variant spellings that have been used in the past and compares them with the spelling systems of some of the languages mentioned in this book.

In the next few pages you will see examples of spelling systems from different languages. Sometimes neighbouring languages can use the same spelling system, so if you know the sound system of a nearby language, and it is similar to the one you are working on (they could be related languages like Italian, French and Spanish) then you may be able to use the same spelling system (see the discussion in Chapter 5 on using information from other languages).

However, you have to be careful. Warlpiri, Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara are geographically close to each other, but each has a different sound system and uses a different spelling system.

The following charts (pages 106–11) are given to show what systems are being used and what you can expect to find in your area. The maps give a general location of the country of the language; they are not meant to show what the boundaries of the language group are. (They show the 1:1,000,000 map on which the country associated with the language occurs.)

Note that there are many similarities among the sound systems of Australian languages, and so the spelling systems are also often similar or identical.



Adnyamathanha (Yura Ngawarla)

|             | labial   | inter-dental | alveolar | retroflex | lamino palatal | velar |
|-------------|----------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------------|-------|
| stop        | p        | th           | t        | rt        | ty             | k     |
| voiced stop | b        | dh           | d        | rd        | dy             |       |
| fricative   | vnh      |              |          |           |                |       |
| nasal       | m        | lh           | n        | rn        | ny             | ng    |
| lateral     |          |              | l        | rl        | ly             |       |
| flap        |          |              | d        | rd        |                |       |
| trill       |          |              | rr       |           |                |       |
| glide       | w        |              | r        |           | y              |       |
| vowels      | a aa i u |              |          |           |                |       |



**Arrente (Eastern Arrente)**

|             | labial  | inter-<br>dental | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-<br>palatal | velar |
|-------------|---------|------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|-------|
| stop        | p       | th               | t        | rt        | ty                 | k     |
| nasal       | m       | nh               | n        | rn        | ny                 | ng    |
| pre-stopped | pm      | tnh              | tn       | rtn       | tny                | kng   |
| lateral     |         | lh               | l        | rl        | ly                 |       |
| trill       |         | rr               |          |           |                    |       |
| glide       | w       | r                | y        |           | h                  |       |
|             |         |                  |          |           |                    |       |
| vowels      | a e i u |                  |          |           |                    |       |



**Burarra - Gun-nartpa**

|             | bilabial  | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-<br>palatal | velar |
|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------|--------------------|-------|
| stop        | p         | t        | rt        | ch                 | k     |
| voiced stop | b         | d        | rd        | j                  | g     |
| nasal       | m         | n        | rn        | ny                 | ng    |
| lateral     |           | l        | rl        | ly                 |       |
| flap, trill |           | rr       | rd        |                    |       |
| glide       | w         |          | r         | y                  |       |
|             |           |          |           |                    |       |
| vowels      | a e i o u |          |           |                    |       |



**Gupapuyngu**

|             | bilabial    | dental | alveolar | retroflex           | lamino-<br>palatal | velar | glottal |
|-------------|-------------|--------|----------|---------------------|--------------------|-------|---------|
| stop        | p/b         | th/dh  | t/d      | <u>t</u> / <u>d</u> | tj/dj              | k/g   | ʔ       |
| nasal       | m           | nh     | n        | <u>n</u>            | ny                 | ŋ     |         |
| lateral     |             |        | l        | <u>l</u>            |                    |       |         |
| flap, trill |             |        | rr       |                     |                    |       |         |
| glide       | w           |        |          | r                   | y                  |       |         |
| vowels      | a ä e i o u |        |          |                     |                    |       |         |



**Gurindji**

|             | bilabial | alveolar | retroflex | lamino<br>palatal | velar |
|-------------|----------|----------|-----------|-------------------|-------|
| stop        | p        | t        | rt        | j                 | k     |
| nasal       | m        | n        | rn        | ny                | ng    |
| lateral     |          | l        | rl        | ly                |       |
| flap, trill |          | rr       |           |                   |       |
| glide       | w        |          | r         | y                 |       |
| vowels      | a i u    |          |           |                   |       |



**Jaru**

|             | bilabial       | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-<br>palatal | velar |
|-------------|----------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|-------|
| stop        | b              | d        | rd        | j                  | g     |
| nasal       | m              | n        | rn        | ny                 | ng    |
| lateral     | l              | rl       | ly        |                    |       |
| flap, trill | rr             | rd       |           |                    |       |
| glide       | w              | r        | y         |                    |       |
| vowels      | a aa i ii u uu |          |           |                    |       |



**Ngarluma**

|             | bilabial | dental | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-<br>palatal | velar |
|-------------|----------|--------|----------|-----------|--------------------|-------|
| stop        | b        | th     | d        | rd        | j                  | k/g   |
| nasal       | m        | nh     | n        | rn        | ny                 | ng    |
| lateral     |          | lh     | l        | rl        | ly                 |       |
| flap, trill |          |        | rr       | rd        |                    |       |
| glide       | w        |        |          | r         | y                  |       |
| vowels      | a i u    |        |          |           |                    |       |



**Paakantyi**

|             | bilabial       | dental | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-palatal | velar |
|-------------|----------------|--------|----------|-----------|----------------|-------|
| stop        | p              | th     | t        | rd        | ty             | k     |
| nasal       | m              | nh     | n        | rn        | ny             | ng    |
| lateral     |                | lh     | l        | rl        | ly             |       |
| flap, trill |                |        | rr       | rd        |                |       |
| glide       | w              |        |          | r         | y              |       |
| vowels      | a aa i ii u uu |        |          |           |                |       |



**Pitjantjatjara**

|             | bilabial       | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-palatal | velar |
|-------------|----------------|----------|-----------|----------------|-------|
| stop        | p              | t        | <u>t</u>  | tj             | k     |
| nasal       | m              | n        | <u>n</u>  | ny             | ng    |
| lateral     |                | l        | <u>l</u>  | ly             |       |
| flap, trill |                | r        |           |                |       |
| glide       | w              |          | <u>r</u>  | y              |       |
| vowels      | a a: i i: u u: |          |           |                |       |



Wik-Mungkan

|             | bilabial | dental | alveolar | retroflex | lamino-<br>palatal | velar | glottal |
|-------------|----------|--------|----------|-----------|--------------------|-------|---------|
| stop        | p        | th     | t        |           | ch                 | k     | ‘       |
| nasal       | m        | nh     | n        |           | ny                 | ng    |         |
| lateral     |          |        | l        |           |                    |       |         |
| flap, trill |          |        | rr       |           |                    |       |         |
| glide       | w        |        |          | r         | y                  |       |         |
| vowels      | a aa     | e ee   | i ii     | o oo      | u uu               |       |         |



he following table lists letters and other symbols that have been used in historical sources together with descriptions of the sounds they have been used to represent. As pointed out elsewhere in this book, it is important to know where a writer comes from, and to understand the effect of their own language’s spelling system on their choice of symbols.

Letters,  
sounds and  
how to say  
them

The column ‘Most common spelling’ shows the set of letters and pairs of letters most commonly drawn on in modern spelling systems for writing Australian languages. There are no phonetic characters or diacritics, which makes them easy to use with computers.

The table is based on Yallop (1982) with three extra columns for the spelling systems of the languages mentioned most often in this book, so you have a key for reading Bundjalung, Gamilaraay and Kurna words aloud.

| Most common spelling | Bundjalung spelling | Gamilaraay spelling | Kurna spelling | Similar English sound  |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------|--|
| a                    | a                   | a                   | a              | as in about, cut   |
| aa                   | ah                  | aa                  |                | as in father   |
| b / p                | b                   | b                   | b / p          | between English b and p  |
| d / t                | d                   | d                   | d / t          | between English t and d  |
| dh / th              | dh<br>e             | th<br>eh            |                | made with your tongue blade pressed against the back of your top front teeth, as for a th sound in English sometimes used as a long i sound, otherwise like e in hen |
| e                    | eh                  |                     |                |  |
| g                    | g                   | g                   | g / k          | between English k and g, occasionally written as k when at the beginning of a word   |
| i                    | i                   | i                   | i / e          | as in pin  |
| ii                   | ih                  | ii                  |                | as in peel   |
| j                    | j                   | dj                  | ty             | sometimes like j in budge, sometimes like ch in catcher  |
| l                    | l                   | l                   | l              | like English l   |
| lh                   |                     |                     |                | made by saying l with your tongue blade pressed against the back of your top front teeth   |
| ly                   |                     |                     | ly             | as in million  |
| m                    | m                   | m                   | m              | like English m   |
| n                    | n                   | n                   | n              | like English n   |
| ng                   | ŋ                   | ng                  | ng             | like ng in singer  |
| nh                   |                     | nh                  |                | made by saying n with your tongue blade pressed against the back of your top front teeth   |
| ny                   | ny/ yn              | ny                  | ny             | as in onion  |
| '                    |                     |                     |                | glottal stop, like in cockney pronunciation of tt in bottle  |
| r                    | r                   | r                   | rr             | like r in English run, with the tongue tip turned back   |
| rd / rt              |                     |                     | rt             | like t said with the tongue tip curled backwards   |
| rl                   |                     |                     | rl             | like l said with the tongue tip curled backwards   |
| rn                   |                     |                     | rn             | like n said with the tongue tip curled backwards   |
| rr                   |                     | rr                  | r / rr         | a trilled r like in Italian or Scottish English  |
| u                    | u                   | u                   | u / o          | as in put  |
| uu                   | uh                  | uu                  |                | as in cool   |
| w                    | w                   | w                   | w              | like English w   |
| y                    | y                   | y                   | y              | like English y   |

| Phonetic symbol | Linguistic description         | Other letters and symbols that have often been used |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|---|
| a               | low back vowel                 | a, ah, ar, o, u                                     |
| ɑ:              | long low back vowel            | a, ah, ar   |
| b / p           | bilabial stop                  |   |
| d               | alveolar stop                  | t   |
|                 | interdental stop               | dh, th, ð, ʈ  |
| e / ɛ / i:      | long high front vowel          | i   |
| g               | velar stop                     | c, cc, k  |
| i               | high front vowel               | e, ee, y  |
| i:              | long high front vowel          | e, ee, y, iy, ih                                    |
| dʒ / tʃ         | alveolar affricate             | c, ch, dy, dy, dj, tj, ty, ty                       |
| l               | alveolar lateral               |   |
| ɭ               | interdental lateral            | l   |
| ɭ               | palatal lateral                | l, gl, lj, ly                                       |
| m               | bilabial nasal                 |   |
| n               | alveolar nasal                 |   |
| ŋ               | velar nasal                    | gn, n, ŋ  |
| ɳ               | interdental nasal              | n, ɳ  |
| ɲ               | palatal nasal                  | gn, nj, ny, ñ                                       |
| ʔ               | glottal stop                   | h   |
| ɻ               | retroflex glide or approximant | R, r, ɻ   |
| ɭ               | retroflex stop                 | d, t, d, t, ɭ, ɭ                                    |
| ɭ / ɭ           | retroflex lateral              | l   |
| ɳ / ɳ           | retroflex nasal                | n, ɳ  |
| r / r           | alveolar flap or trill         | r, d, ɻ   |
| u / ʊ           | high back unrounded vowel      | o, oo   |
| u:              | long high back unrounded vowel | o, oo   |
| w               | labiovelar or bilabial glide   |   |
| j               | palatal glide                  | j, i  |

## Workshop exercises

### Exercise 1 — Sound systems

These exercises aim to show how sound systems work and how they are or are not reflected by spelling systems.

- 1 Circle the following pairs of words which differ in only one sound.

pig / big

cat / dog

pit / bit

does / goes

in / it

fat / thin

heart / cart

hate / wait

- 2 Circle the silent letters in the following words:

kneel

talk

comb

sign

island

honest

- 3 Circle the parts of the following pairs that have the same sound. Notice that the same sound can be represented by different letters.

enough / full

women / trip

knight / plan

loose / snooze

which / catch

thing / breathing

- 4 What do these exercises tell us about the spelling system of English?

- 5 Write the following words using a practical spelling system.

a. Gundagai

b. Woolloomoolloo

c. Kununurra

d. Pardoo

e. Mia Mia

f. Coolgardie ■

**Exercise 2 — Spelling**

Look through either a dictionary or a wordlist of an Australian language. Find a word that contains the following sound and write it in the space provided. Practise pronouncing the words as you read them and copy them.

a

i

j

k

l

lh

ly

m

n

ng

nh

ny

p

r

rl

rn

rr

rt

t

th

u

w

y