

Contest Rules of the 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee

Preface

The Scripps National Spelling Bee (SNSB) requires spellers, parents and regional partners to read these rules prior to the SNSB National Competition.

These *Contest Rules of the 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee* are the rules in effect at the National Competition only. The SNSB has no authority over the conduct of local spelling bees and will not render judgments relating to their conduct or outcomes.

ALL DECISIONS OF SNSB OFFICIALS ARE FINAL.

Definitions

National Competition: The current (as indicated by the date hereof) annual competition hosted and administered by the SNSB.

Official(s): An administrator of the Scripps National Spelling Bee National Competition, including the executive director, competition directors, record keepers, judges, pronouncers and word panelists.

Root: The simple element inferred as the basis from which a word is derived by phonetic change or by extension (as composition and addition of a prefix, suffix, inflectional ending, or replative). As used in these rules, Root has the meaning provided by *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, noun sense 6.

Round(s): A portion of the competition in which all spellers who have not been eliminated from the competition are given one word to spell or one vocabulary question to answer, beginning with the lowest numbered speller and ending with the highest numbered speller.

Word list: The set of words, word information, and vocabulary questions and answers prepared in advance of the competition for use in the competition.

Championship Word List: The set of words and word information prepared in advance of the competition for use in an anticipated winning round, a round in which only one speller is competing (the only speller who has not been eliminated from the competition).

Spell-off: a special round of the competition used to determine a champion or co-champions in the case where the competition exceeds or may exceed a certain time. The details of the Spell-off and the circumstances under which a Spell-off is activated are explained in Rule 3.

Spell-off word list: The set of words and word information prepared in advance of the competition for use in the event a Spell-off is activated, which is always delivered to each individual competitor in the same order.

Speller(s): A student who has qualified to participate in the SNSB National Competition who has met and continues to meet all eligibility requirements defined below.

Regional Partner: An organization that holds an agreement with the SNSB to run an SNSB-sanctioned program, organize and host a regional competition, and advance a speller, or spellers, to the national competition.

Prizes: cash or other items of value given as a result of a Speller's participation or advancement in the Scripps National Spelling Bee; prize details shall be listed prior to the 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee at: <https://spellingbee.com/prizes>.

Rule 1: Eligibility

A speller qualifying for the 2026 SNSB National Competition must meet these requirements.

Who they are:

1. A speller must not have passed beyond the eighth grade or an international equivalent on or before August 31, 2025.
2. A speller must not have reached their 15th birthday on or before August 31, 2025.
3. A speller must not have any first-, second- or third-degree relatives (i.e., sibling, parent, stepparent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, half-sibling, stepsibling or first cousin) who are current employees of The E.W. Scripps Company (including its affiliates or subsidiaries) as of February 1, 2026.

What they do:

4. The speller must not previously have won a SNSB National Competition.
5. The speller must attend a school that is enrolled with the SNSB for the 2025-2026 program year.
6. The speller must not have repeated any grade for the purpose of extending their eligibility under these rules. If the speller has repeated any grade, the speller must notify the SNSB of the circumstances of grade repetition by March 31, 2026, and the SNSB will, in its sole discretion, determine the speller's eligibility status on or before April 30, 2026.
7. The speller — or the speller's parent, legal guardian or school official acting on the speller's behalf — must not have declared to any entity an academic classification higher than eighth grade for any purpose including high school graduation equivalency or proficiency examinations and/or examinations such as the PSAT, SAT or ACT.
8. The speller must not have earned the legal equivalent of a high school diploma.
9. The speller must not bypass or circumvent normal school activity to study for spelling bees. The SNSB defines normal school activity as adherence to at least four courses of study other than language arts, spelling, Latin, Greek, vocabulary and etymology for at least four hours per weekday for 34 of the 38 weeks between August 19, 2025, and May 24, 2026.
10. Once having been disqualified at any level of a regional partner's spelling bee program between August 2025 and April 2026, the speller may not seek advancement in the 2026 SNSB program through another regional partner and/or enrollment in another school.
11. The speller must have been declared a champion of an SNSB-sanctioned regional spelling bee on or after February 1, 2026, or be named as a national competitor by competing in an official SNSB program or by an SNSB regional partner.
Additionally, the speller may not be a first-, second- or third-degree relative of any person directly involved in organizing a regional partner's program.

The speller, upon qualifying for the 2026 SNSB National Competition, must submit to the SNSB a completed Champion Registration, a completed Prerequisite Assessment, an Appearance Consent and Release Agreement signed by speller and speller's parent/legal guardian, a signed Certification of Eligibility Form, a liability waiver signed by speller and speller's parent/legal guardian, and a photo. The speller will notify the SNSB, at least 24 hours prior to the first day of the SNSB National Competition, if any of the information provided in Champion Registration is no longer true or requires updating. The speller's regional partner will provide access to all necessary items.

The SNSB may disqualify any speller prior to or during the National Competition who is not in compliance with any of the above eligibility requirements. Further, for a period of one year following the conclusion of the SNSB National Competition, the SNSB may disqualify any Speller found to have not been in compliance with the above eligibility requirements while participating in the National Competition. Upon any such disqualification Speller shall be required to forfeit and/or return any prizes, rank and other benefits accorded to the speller as a result of participation in the 2026 SNSB national competition. In the event of such disqualification, SNSB may in its sole discretion name an alternate

winner or winners to replace disqualified Speller. All eligibility decisions are in the sole discretion of SNSB. Eligibility decisions are not subject to appeal.

Rule 2: Official Dictionary and Source of Words

The Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary, available at <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com>, is the official dictionary of the SNSB and, except as noted below, is the source of words and word information for all Rounds of competition. The only words in the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary not eligible for use in competition are those marked as *archaic* or *obsolete*. However, if a word has multiple definitions and at least one definition is not marked as archaic or obsolete, then that word is eligible for use in competition, provided the SNSB is utilizing that particular definition. Conversely, if a word has only one definition and it is labeled as archaic or obsolete, that word will not be used in competition.

The study list and source of words for Round One (spelling) and Round Two (multiple-choice vocabulary) is the *2026 Words of the Champions*, copyright 2025, Scripps National Spelling Bee. The SNSB crafts the word list according to the following:

1. The Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary is the final authority and sole source for the spelling of all words offered in competition.
2. The SNSB crafts the pronunciations of words from Merriam-Webster Unabridged and may choose to include a pronunciation included in one of the most recently copyrighted Merriam-Webster dictionaries, including the then current online version. However, the SNSB is under no obligation to provide any pronunciation that appears outside of Merriam-Webster Unabridged, nor to provide all pronunciations listed in Merriam-Webster Unabridged.
3. Correct answers in multiple-choice vocabulary questions are crafted from definitions in Merriam-Webster Unabridged. The correct answer is the one that most closely aligns with the definition of the word.
4. The SNSB reserves the right to correct errors in the word list at any point during the competition.
5. Regarding languages of origin: The SNSB is under no obligation to list all languages a word, a word element or a part of a word passed through before it entered modern English. Languages that significantly altered the word are listed.

If more than one spelling of a word is listed in Merriam-Webster Unabridged, the judges will assess the following to deem whether a variant spelling will be accepted as correct:

1. All pronunciations for each spelling are identical; and,
2. The definition offered in the word list is identical to one provided in the variant's word entry in Merriam-Webster Unabridged. Spellings labeled as archaic or obsolete will not be accepted as correct.

Rule 3: Format

The competition will be separated into four distinct segments: **Preliminaries, Quarterfinals, Semifinals** and **Finals**.

Each segment will have at least one round of competition; the only segment with a set number of rounds (three) is the Preliminaries. The pattern of competition for the Preliminaries will be one round of spelling, followed by a round of multiple-choice vocabulary, and continuing with the Round Three Test. The pattern of competition for all other segments will be: one round of spelling, followed by a round of multiple-choice vocabulary, and continuing with rounds of spelling competition until SNSB officials declare the end of the competition segment.

Single Elimination: In all onstage rounds, a speller is eliminated from the competition and will not advance to the next round or segment at the first instance of providing an incorrect answer (i.e., incorrectly spelling a word in a spelling round or upon providing an incorrect answer in a vocabulary round), except as provided under “End-of-Bee Procedure” and “Spell-Off and Provision for Declaration of Co-Champions” herein. All spellers eliminated during the same round are tied for the same place. All spellers remaining in the competition at the end of a segment advance to the next segment, with the exception of the Finals.

In the **Preliminaries:**

If a speller spells correctly in Round One, the speller will compete immediately in Round Two.

If a speller answers correctly in Round Two, the speller will be asked to return to take the Round Three Test.

Round Three Test format:

The Round Three Test will occur after Rounds One and Two. Only spellers who correctly answer their Round Two vocabulary question will take the Round Three Test.

The Round Three Test has 30 items divided into two sections: spelling and vocabulary. A speller receives one point for each of the 24 words spelled correctly in the spelling section and one point for each of the 6 questions answered correctly in the multiple-choice vocabulary section, for a maximum of 30 points.

During the evening of Tuesday, May 26, the Bee will email the parent(s) or guardian(s) of each speller who took the Round Three Test letting them know if their speller will advance to the Quarterfinals or not.

Eliminations: There are no immediate eliminations for providing an incorrect answer on the Round Three Test. Spellers will be grouped by their number of correct answers. The exact number of spellers to advance will be determined by identifying the group whose minimum score results in as close to 100 Quarterfinalists as possible. Each speller achieving the identified minimum score or higher will advance. The Bee reserves the right to advance more or fewer than 100 spellers to the Quarterfinals to achieve a manageable number of quarterfinalists close to 100.

All spellers not achieving the minimum score to advance are eliminated. All spellers eliminated after Round Three and before the start of the Quarterfinals are tied for the same place.

The **Quarterfinals**, **Semifinals** and **Finals** are conducted in rounds, each round beginning with all spellers who have not been eliminated. The SNSB reserves the right to pause any of these rounds to accommodate production timing requirements, even if such pause results in a given round being completed on the date or time a different round is scheduled.

1. End-of-Bee Procedure: If all spellers in a Finals round misspell or answer incorrectly, all remain in the competition and a new round begins with the spellers competing in their original order. If only one speller spells or answers correctly in a round, a new round begins, and the speller is given the next spelling word on the Championship Word List. The potential championship round will always be a spelling round, not a vocabulary round. If the speller correctly spells the potential winning word in this one-word round, the speller is declared the champion. If the speller misspells the potential winning word, a new round begins with all spellers from the previous round. These spellers compete in their original order with words drawn from the word list.
2. Spell-Off and Provision for Declaration of Co-Champions: Spell-off.

The National Competition will be the subject of a live broadcast.

Officials will have the option to activate a Spell-off to conclude the Finals if necessary to end the competition within the allotted time.

During the Spell-off, each speller not previously eliminated from the competition will have a total of 90 seconds to spell a series of words provided from the separate Spell-off Word List. Spellers will spell in the order of their speller number. Participating spellers will spell one at a time with all speller(s), except the active speller, sequestered while the active speller competes.

The active speller's time will begin after the pronouncer pronounces the first word on the Spell-off Word List. The same words will be delivered in the same order to each speller in the Spell-off. Passing or skipping is not allowed; the speller must make a sincere and plausible attempt to spell each word before being given the next word on the list.

The active speller will have the benefit of viewing a monitor featuring each word's part of speech, language of origin and definition. The active speller may ask questions of the pronouncer, just as they would during a normal spelling round; however, time used asking questions and receiving answers will be part of the 90-second time limit. Any spelling not completed within the 90-second time limit will not count toward the total score.

After all spellers remaining in the competition have competed in the Spell-off, the speller who spelled the most words correctly during their 90-second turn will be declared champion. If a single champion does not emerge, the officials will attempt to break the tie by determining the speller with the highest percentage of words spelled correctly out of completed words attempted during the Spell-off. The speller with the highest percentage correct will be declared champion. If two or more spellers earn the same top score and have the same percentage correct, the judges will declare co-champions.

Rule 4: Time and Schedule

Time Limits: During oral spelling rounds, the speller's time limit per turn is 90 seconds. Time begins after the pronouncer first pronounces the word. The speller will have the benefit of viewing a monitor displaying a 90-second countdown clock.

The judges and pronouncer will not communicate with the speller during the final 15 seconds. The judges will disqualify any speller who does not provide a correct, complete spelling before the expiration of time (0 seconds).

This applies to oral spelling rounds in regular competition only; for time rules applying to a Spell-off, see Rule 3.

During oral multiple-choice vocabulary rounds, the speller's time limit per turn is 30 seconds. Time begins after the pronouncer first reads the question and the answer choices aloud. The speller will have the benefit of viewing both a monitor displaying a 30-second countdown clock and a monitor displaying the question, including the spelling of the word in question, and all answer choices. The judges and pronouncer may communicate with the speller during the full 30 seconds at the speller's request.

If SNSB officials need to discuss a competition-related matter during a speller's allotted time at the microphone, the record keeper may pause the time clock at the direction of SNSB officials, and they will inform the speller when they pause and resume the time clock.

Schedule modifications: SNSB officials may, in their sole discretion, announce schedule and/or location changes.

Rule 5: Speller Accommodations

The SNSB strives to provide accommodation for spellers who have diagnosed and documented conditions. The SNSB will not provide accommodations that may, in their sole discretion, constitute a competitive advantage. All requests for accommodations should be directed in writing to the SNSB before May 1, 2026, by emailing contact@spellingbee.com. SNSB officials have discretionary power to amend oral competition requirements on a case-by-case basis.

Rule 6: Pronouncer's Role

The pronouncer is a SNSB official who will read each word or ask each question to the active speller. If the pronouncer is unable to do so, the associate pronouncer may do so.

In Spelling Rounds:

The pronouncer strives to pronounce words according to the diacritical markings in the word list. If a word has one or more homonyms, the pronouncer indicates which word is to be spelled by providing the word's definition. The pronouncer responds only to the speller's requests for repetition of the word's pronunciation, a definition, use in a sentence, part of speech, language(s) of origin and alternate pronunciation(s). When presented with requests for alternate pronunciations, the pronouncer checks for alternate pronunciations in the word list. The pronouncer will grant all such requests as long as they are in accordance with time constraints outlined in Rule 4.

Pronouncer's sense of helpfulness: The pronouncer may offer word information — without the speller having requested the information — if the pronouncer senses that the information is helpful and the information appears in the 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee word list or Merriam-Webster Unabridged.

In Multiple-Choice Vocabulary Rounds:

The pronouncer reads aloud the question and the three answer choices: (A), (B) and (C). The pronouncer responds only to the speller's requests for the word, question and/or answer choices to be repeated. The pronouncer may also spell aloud the word in question. No other requests will be granted.

Rule 7: Associate Pronouncer's Role

In spelling rounds, the associate pronouncer serves in a quality assurance role for all word information provided by the pronouncer, including directing the pronouncer to correct any pronunciation errors should they occur.

The associate pronouncer also strives to respond to the speller's questions about root words.

A speller may ask if their word contains a particular root by giving a pronunciation of the root along with its form and meaning in the ultimate attested language of origin, as listed in the etymologies of Merriam-Webster Unabridged. The associate pronouncer is not obligated to look anywhere but the entry for the word in question in Merriam-Webster Unabridged for the answer to the question.

Rule 8: Speller's Role

The speller represents their regional spelling bee program by participating in all rounds of competition until eliminated and adhering to expectations of fairness and integrity.

When spelling a word, the speller must pronounce each letter distinctly and with sufficient volume to be understood by the judges. The speller may ask the pronouncer to say the word again, define it, use it in a

sentence, provide the part of speech, provide the language(s) of origin, and/or provide an alternate pronunciation or pronunciations. The speller may also ask root word questions that meet the specifications delineated in Rule 7. The speller indicates a completed spelling by pronouncing the word after spelling it; judges will render a ruling on the spelling after the speller has pronounced the word, or when the 90-second time limit has elapsed.

In multiple-choice vocabulary rounds, the speller may answer the question by providing (1) the text of the chosen answer or (2) the letter associated with the chosen answer along with the answer's text. If the correct answer is identified by either the correct associated letter and correct answer or by the correct answer alone, the speller is correct. If a speller provides the letter alone, the judges will wait for the speller to read the text of the answer aloud before rendering a judgment. The speller must provide the text of their chosen answer within the time limit as outlined in Rule 4. Note: The correct answer is the one that most closely aligns with the definition of the word.

Misunderstandings: In spelling rounds, the speller is responsible for any misunderstanding of the word unless (1) the pronouncer never provided a correct pronunciation at any point during the speller's turn at the microphone; (2) the pronouncer provided an incorrect definition or part of speech; or (3) the speller correctly spelled a homonym of the word, and the pronouncer did not provide a definition. Ultimately, it is the speller's responsibility to understand the word they are being asked to spell.

In multiple-choice vocabulary rounds, the speller is responsible for any misunderstanding of the word, question or answer choices.

Aids: The speller may not wear or bring to any segment of the competition any object that could be construed as having potential to convey spelling advice unless the object is an approved accommodation in accordance with Rule 5. Further, the speller may not bear on any part of the body any writing or other markings that could be construed as having potential to convey any advice or aid in answering any competition-related question. Failure to comply may result in the judges acting in accordance with clause (2) under "Disqualifications for reasons other than clear misspelling or incorrect answer" in Rule 9.

Rule 9: Judges' Role

The judges uphold the rules and are responsible for determining whether spellings and answers given by a speller are correct, and, generally, upholding these rules of the competition.

Misunderstandings: If the judges sense, in their sole discretion, that the speller has misunderstood the word, the judges will direct the speller and pronouncer to interact until they are satisfied that reasonable attempts have been made to assist the speller in understanding the word within the time constraints outlined in Rule 4. It is sometimes impossible to detect a misunderstanding until an error has been made, and the judges are not responsible for the speller's misunderstanding.

Pronouncer Errors: If the judges believe that the pronouncer's pronunciation does not match the pronunciation specified in the diacritical markings, the judges will direct the pronouncer to correct the error as soon as it is detected within the speller's time limit.

Disqualifications for reasons other than clear misspelling or incorrect answer: The judges will disqualify a speller:

1. who does not approach the microphone when it is the speller's time to receive a word or question unless there are extenuating circumstances that, in the judges' sole discretion, merit holding the speller's word or question in reserve and offering it to the speller after all other spellers in the round have completed their turn and before the close of the round;
2. who, or whose family or guests, engages in conduct that does not promote fair honest rivalry, courteous relations and graceful acceptance of competition results or decisions of the officials;

3. who, in the process of retracing a spelling, alters the letters or sequence of letters from those first said, regardless of whether the original letters were correct;
4. who, in the process of providing a spelling or answer, does not speak clearly or in an articulate manner with the result that the speller's answer is unclear; or
5. who, in the process of answering a vocabulary question, provides a blend of correct and incorrect information; i.e., a letter choice with the text of a choice that does not match the original letter identified.

Speller activities that do not merit disqualification: The judges may not disqualify a speller:

1. for failing to pronounce the word before spelling it;
2. for asking a question;
3. for noting or failing to note the capitalization of a word, the presence of a diacritical mark, or the presence of a space or a hyphen or other form of punctuation; or
4. for failing to identify the letter associated with their answer choice in a vocabulary round.

Modifications: SNSB officials may, at any time and in their sole discretion, announce changes to these rules. Any such change should be consistent with the guiding principles of fairness to all spellers and competition integrity.

Rule 10: Internal Review and Appeals

Throughout the competition, the officials manage a real-time review process consisting of live and recorded crosschecking of spellers' interactions with officials and of the word list. One official serves exclusively as the spellers' advocate by reviewing audio and video files, escalating any issues through officials, and, where necessary, acting on officials' requests for further review.

If a speller, a speller's parent or guardian, or the regional partner of a speller wishes to raise an issue to the attention of officials, they may do so according to the following **Appeal Process and**

Timeliness Requirement:

- An appeal form must be requested from, completed and submitted to the Bee Week Help Desk.
- The deadline to submit an appeal is before the speller would have received their next word had they stayed in the spelling bee. Effort should be made to submit an appeal by the end of the round in which the speller was eliminated.
- When five or fewer spellers remain in the competition, an oral appeal must be made at the Bee Week Help Desk before the speller would have received their next word had they stayed in the spelling bee.
- Only a speller, a speller's parent or guardian, or a speller's regional partner may request, complete, or submit an appeal form or lodge an oral appeal.
- Individuals who have filed appeals or who wish to file an appeal, or representatives of those individuals, may not directly approach officials.
- No appeals shall be heard or considered after conclusion of the Bee.

A speller who received a correct pronunciation and definition for a spelling word has no grounds for appeal. Communicating Results:

- If the judges rule to alter a prior determination, whether as the result of an appeal or of internal review, the speller and/or the speller's representative affected will be notified.
- If there is no change to a contested decision, officials are under no obligation to publicly communicate the decision or discuss the details of the ruling. The appellant or their

representative may approach the Bee Week Help Desk for information on the status of their appeal.

ALL DECISIONS OF SNSB OFFICIALS ARE FINAL

Please direct any questions about the Contest Rules of the 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee to spellingbee.com/contact.