

The problem

Most people think that you can just 'write a word how it sounds'. There are two reasons why this idea doesn't work well:

(1) English spelling does not really tell you the sound –

- the 'g' in **gem** and the 'g' in **gum** are different sounds
- the 'u' in **but** and the 'u' in **put** are different sounds
- the 'oo' in **book** and the 'oo' in **boot** are different sounds
- the 'y' in **my** and the 'y' in **any** are different sounds...

All of this works fine in English because we already know how the words sound. But for language revival, people don't already know how the words sound. So the spelling system has to show the sounds more clearly.

Problem (1): You may be able to write a word in English letters 'how it sounds' to you. But whatever you write, someone will pronounce it differently to how you had thought.

(2) Aboriginal languages have many sounds that English does not have. This means there are no English letters ready to spell the sounds with.

For example:

• **An Aboriginal language may have 4 different 'n' sounds and 4 different 'l' sounds.**

English has one letter for 'n' and one letter for 'l'. You could possibly use 'nn' and 'll' as well – but there's nothing to spell the others with.

Problem (2): English spelling does not have the resources you need to write your language 'how it sounds'. You will have to use the letters in new ways. So people do not know automatically how to read the sounds of their language. They will have to learn the new ways of reading and writing.

"The good thing about all this is that your community can choose the spelling you want. There is no such a thing as a 'correct' spelling system for your language. It is up to you to decide."

A solution

Communities and linguists working out how to write Aboriginal languages have found it very useful to think about sounds instead of words. If you set out all the sounds that your language uses, you can decide on a way to spell each sound. Once this is done, you use that spelling for that sound, in every word, every time. This is very different from the English system.

If you would like some starting points, see the other Spelling Sheets for doing this.

What next?

Once your community has agreed on the spelling system you will use, people will need to be taught how to use it. Because people are used to the ways of spelling sounds in English, they will not always automatically read the spelling system the way you expected.

You will need some or all of the following:

- a CD, website, or tape with notes, where people can hear the sounds and see the spelling
- a written explanation with a table or list showing the sounds and their spellings
- a workshop where people can hear and see the sounds and practise saying and writing them.

For more information, contact VACL at vacl@vaclang.org.au or via the web at www.vaclang.org.au