

# Handy Handouts®

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## Rule Breakers: Irregular Verbs and Irregular Plural Nouns

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### History

Why is language so complicated? Language is influenced by many factors, such as the migrations of people, political and social changes, and geographical boundaries. Irregular forms can be traced back to when people spoke Old English. Past tense verbs often had a “t” or a “d” sound at the end, just like the irregular verb “keep/kept.” Plural nouns often changed the vowel, just like “man/men,” or the word stayed the same like “sheep/sheep.” However, invasions from the Vikings and the Norman Conquest of 1066 introduced new rules to people speaking Old English, such as the rules that have evolved into past tense –ed and plural –s. Some words kept the Old English rule (which looks like the irregular forms). But most verbs and nouns acquired the new rule (using past tense –ed and plural –s). Over time, English has evolved into what we speak today. Whew!



### Introduction

Language is a system governed by rules. These rules apply to the way sounds are used in words (phonology), the individual parts of words that have meaning (morphology), where words belong in a sentence (syntax), and the meaning of the words (semantics). Rules are easy to follow and help language learners with predictable patterns. But when parts of language fall outside of these rules, people with a language delay, language disorder, or who are learning a second language have a difficult time acquiring them. This is evident in irregular verbs and irregular plurals. Typically, in English, the rules are the following: We add –ed to verbs that happened in the past (e.g. walked, talked, climbed) and –s to show more than one noun (e.g. cats, pencils, cups). But verbs, such as “sang, ate, and grew,” are not “sing-ed, eat-ed, and grow-ed.” And nouns, such as “sheep, elves, and feet,” are not “sheep-s, elf-s, and foot-s.” Irregular nouns and verbs break the “normal” rules but are still grammatically correct.



### Irregular Forms in Language Development

Typically developing children acquiring language can apply “regular rules” in places they don’t belong (e.g. “I threwed the ball,” or “I see the tall womans.”) This is called an overgeneralization error, because the common rule generalizes to places where it doesn’t apply. Overgeneralization is a typical part of language development and is phased out over time. However, if these errors persist beyond an age when most children have acquired the irregular forms, it may be a sign of a language disorder. Consult with a speech-language pathologist regarding developmental milestones to determine if overgeneralization errors are still age-appropriate for your child. Keep in mind that a child’s regional dialect could also dictate how he/she acquires irregular forms.



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## Intervention

If your child has difficulty acquiring irregular nouns and verbs, here are some tips to help:



- **Model the correct usage**

– If you notice your child producing an overgeneralization error, you can model a correct production. Have the child repeat the correct form to reinforce the concept (e.g. Child: “I threw the ball.” Adult: “You threw the ball. Nice job! Now say, ‘I threw the ball.’”)



- **Play a memory game**

– Games are a great way to expose a child to language and make new pathways in the brain. Many products offered by Super Duper® Publications target irregular nouns and verbs in an engaging, game-play format.



- **Make it into a song**

– Making silly songs is a strategy to help commit difficult-to-remember concepts into memory.



- **Make it meta**

– The prefix “meta” means learning about learning. Overtly teaching a child common patterns in irregular forms can help them learn words when they are struggling to acquire (e.g. teaching the rule, “If a noun ends in –lf, drop the f and add –ves, such as “shelf” to “shelves.”)



## Conclusion

Even now, language is evolving. The way we speak today will seem foreign to English speakers 1,000 years from now, the same way Old English seems foreign to us. For example, some irregular forms are being phased out as language evolves, such as “cactuses” becoming more acceptable as the plural form of “cactus” and “cacti” being used less. Without knowing the history or being able to explain the rules, most children are able to acquire language to perfection over time. However, when children (or adults) need a little extra help with the rules, people “in the know” with simple strategies can help learners overcome the overwhelming complexity of language.

### Resources:

<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/english/english-irregular-verbs/>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_gwJHuEa9Jc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gwJHuEa9Jc)

<https://laughingsquid.com/etymological-history-irregular-verbs/>

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